Barcelona 2026

Tripodos

Video Games: Industry, Entrepreneurship, Creativity and Innovation

59

BLANQUERNA
RAMON LLULL UNIVERSITY
Communication and International Relations

Tripodos

Communication

59

2026
http://www.tripodos.com
e-mail: tripodos@blanquerna.url.edu

Blanquerna
RAMON LLULL UNIVERSITY
Communication and International Relations

Cataloguing Data Tripodos: Communication / Ramon Llull University. Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations. — 1 (1996-). — Barcelona. 23 cm.

Biannual journal.—As of issue 2 (November 1996), the name of the journal has changed from Trípode to Tripodos.
ISSN: 1138-3305

Editor in Chief Marçal Sintes

Assistant Editor Lluís Anyó

Advisory Board Hugo Aznar, CEU Cardenal Herrera University (Spain)
Suzana Barbosa, Federal University of Bahia (Brazil)
Andreu Casero, Jaume I University of Castellón (Spain)
Manuel Castells, Open University of Catalonia (Spain). Southern California University, Los Angeles (United States)
Albert Chillón, Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain)
Emiliana de Blasio, LUISS Guido Carli University (Italy)
Javier Díaz Noci, Pompeu Fabra University (Spain)
Mara Einstein, Queens College, City University of New York (United States)
Willem Th. M. Frijhoff, Erasmus University Rotterdam (Netherlands)
Margarita Ledo, University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain)
Carolina Moreno Castro, University of Valencia (Spain)
Marcos Palacios, Federal University of Bahia (Brazil)
Gregory Payne, Emerson College, Boston (United States)
Alejandro Rost, National University of Comahue (Argentina)
Michael Walrave, University of Antwerp (Belgium)

Gender Editor Verónica Israel

Junior Editor Valentina Laferrara

Production Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations

Editorial Coordinator Sònia Poch

Graphic Design Esperanza Maestro

Composition Sònia Poch

Edition Elizabeth Ibars

Technical Editing Board Sue Aran, Valeria Bello, Joan Cuenca, Fernando de Felipe, Daniel Esparza, Valentina Laferrara, Òscar Mateos, Alfons Medina, Josep Rom, Alba Sabaté, Jaume Suau

Exchange Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations
Library. 12, Valldonzella street. 08001 Barcelona. Tel. (+34) 93 557 25 01

Subscriptions Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations
Joan Coromines Square. 08001 Barcelona. Tel. (+34) 93 253 31 08

First edition: 2026

As of 2019, Tripodos is an open-access journal under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike (BY-NC-SA) license. Commercial use cannot be made of the original work or any possible derivative works, which must be distributed under the same license governing the original.

© Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations – URL (Ramon Llull University).

Back issues are available. Please send an email to tripodos@blanquerna.url.edu.

Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations, in accordance with article 32.1, second paragraph, of the revised text of the Intellectual Property Act, expressly opposes any use of the pages of Tripodos or any fragment thereof, for the purposes of press reviews. Any act of exploitation (reproduction, distribution, public communication, making available to the public, etc.) will require the appropriate authorisation, which may be granted by CEDRO within the limits set by the license.

Tripodos, number 59 | 2026
ISSN: 1138-3305

Table of Contents

Monograph

Video Games: Industry, Entrepreneurship, Creativity and Innovation. Joan Arnedo-Moreno, Marta Fernández-Ruiz, Carles Sora-Domenjó, Lluís Anyó 6

- Cuphead as Playable Animation: Authorship, Aesthetics, and Visual Language in the Indie Video Game. Elisabet Fonts 11
- Beyond Mechanics: An Actor-Network Perspective on Narrative Design in Indie Video Games. Şafak Topçu, Metin Çavuş 31
- Creativity at Play: Content-Creators and Micro-Entrepreneurship in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Cátia Ferreira, Carla Ganito, Soraia Gonçalves 51
- Designing for monetization: A taxonomy of dark patterns in top-grossing GaaS video games. Sergio Gutiérrez-Manjón, Salvador Gómez-García, Gema Bonales-Daimiel 76
- Peripheral Games: Chilean Glocalization and the Independent Video Game Scene. José Agustín Donoso-Munita, Pablo Quiñonero-Pertusa 98
- Immersive Indies: On Immersive Strategies in Independent Games for Virtual Reality (VR). Michael Walter 115
- End of Memories: Coming-of-Age, Love, Loss, and Friendship. Ludonarrative Writing in Indie Games about Asia-Pacific. Alberto Porta Pérez 134

Fundamentals

- Fiction Based on Real Events as an Informative Experience: A Theoretical Proposal. Lucía Gastón-Lorente 152

Norms of Publication 169

Data on reception and acceptance of originals 170

Monograph

Video Games: Industry, Entrepreneurship, Creativity and Innovation

Editors:

Joan Arnedo-Moreno
Marta Fernández-Ruiz
Carles Sora-Domenjó
Lluís Anyó

Tripodos, number 59 | 2026 | 6-10
ISSN: 1138-3305

Video Games: Industry, Entrepreneurship, Creativity and Innovation

Joan Arnedo-Moreno
Open University of Catalonia (UOC), Spain
Marta Fernández-Ruiz
Polytechnic University of Catalonia (UPC), Spain
Carles Sora-Domenjó
Polytechnic University of Catalonia (UPC), Spain
Lluís Anyó
Ramon Llull University (URL), Spain

Since the formal establishment of Game Studies in 2001, the academic landscape has built a robust foundation for understanding video games as a complex medium of communication and cultural expression. While early research focused on defining the medium and its core processes of consumption and reception, the modern era faces a shifting paradigm. The maturation of the industry, rapid technological advancement, and a diversifying global player base have necessitated a pivot toward more specialized areas of inquiry. Consequently, both academia and the industry are now converging on the study of areas such as entrepreneurship, authorship, and innovation within the "indie" (independent) video game sector.

Entrepreneurship has been a cornerstone of gaming since its inception, often driven by small teams or solo developers with singular visions. Today, the democratization of development tools, digital distribution, and crowdfunding has made game creation more accessible than ever. However, this ease of entry creates a paradox: as the market becomes saturated, developers face unprecedented competition and "discoverability" crises. Consequently, researchers are tasked with analysing success and failure cases to establish best practices for a new generation of creators.

Also a key theme within this debate is the distinction between indie and mainstream (AAA) games. Indie games are generally characterized by financial and creative autonomy, whereas AAA titles are often tethered to market-driven formulas due to high production costs and risk aversion. This distinction led to the emergence of "Indie Game Studies", which views gaming through the lens of cultural industries (Moreno, 2003; Parker, 2013; Pérez Rufí, 2015).

Within this framework, the concept of the "auteur" —borrowed from film theory— has become a significant point of debate. In cinema, an auteur is a director whose personal style and thematic concerns are so distinctive that they are considered the "author" of the work. Applying this to video games is complex due to the inherently collaborative nature of development. However, scholars continue to investigate whether a "recognizable style" can be attributed to specific creators, particularly in indie spaces where individual influence is more pronounced (Baecque, 2003).

Creative and original approaches to mechanics and narrative design are also a defining feature of indie games (Chiapello, 2022). Unlike mainstream games that often rely on established tropes, indie projects frequently experiment with cultural and social dimensions, pushing the boundaries of what games can represent in both form and content (Anthropy, 2012; Sandovar, 2017; Juul, 2019; Ruffino, 2020). Interestingly, even when indie games utilize "retro" styles or resurface old design formulas, researchers like Tosca (2023) argue that these repetitions offer unique creative opportunities and distinct meanings rather than mere nostalgia.

Recent academic milestones, such as the *Loading…* special issue *Indie, Eh? Some Kind of Game Studies* and the *Symposium on Research in the Indie Game Industry* (I3V), signal a deepening commitment to this sub-field. These forums explore diverse topics ranging from player communities and narrative design to localization and accessibility. This scholarly momentum, exemplified by recent analyses of specific ecosystems like the Spanish and Catalan indie scene, underscores that indie games are no longer a peripheral interest but a primary site for understanding the future of innovation and authorship in digital media (Vilasís-Pamos *et al*., 2024).

Tripodos' 59th Monograph, *Video games: Industry, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation*, aims to contribute to existing research on the state of the video game industry and to establish best practices and innovative proposals that drive success within the four key areas of entrepreneurship, authorship, creativity and innovation. While this issue places a special emphasis on the indie sector (given its strong intersection with these four areas), the included works encompass different perspectives to the topics at hand, enriching the breadth of content and methodologies covered, which include animation and authorship, technology and design, industry and micro-entrepreneurship, mechanics and monetisation, globalisation and the indie scene, VR and innovation, identity and the periphery, analysed through methodologies such as aesthetic analysis, semi-structured interviews, case studies and social media analysis, qualitative and quantitative analysis, comparative analysis, textual analysis and autoethnography, within a diverse geographical perspective that addresses both the global landscape and more peripheral areas of the video game industry.

This Monograph contains a total of seven articles. The article "Cuphead as playable animation: Authorship, aesthetics, and visual language in the indie video game", by Elisabet Fonts, analyses *Cuphead* as a prime example of aesthetic authorship, where traditional frame-by-frame animation is an inseparable expressive system rather than mere decoration. By merging animation studies

and game theory, the article demonstrates how the creators' creative direction reinterprets early cartoon language, creating an "auteur game" defined by its unique visual identity, sound, and interactive rhythm.

The study "Beyond mechanics: An actor-network perspective on narrative design in indie video games", by Safak Topcu and Metin Çavu□, reveals that indie game narratives emerge from a complex socio-technical network rather than a single author. Analysing practitioner interviews and GDC talks, researchers identified thirteen key "actors". The findings highlight how the interplay between players, genre, technology, and budget fundamentally shapes storytelling, proving that narratives are products of creative, technical, and commercial forces.

How content creators leverage games for micro-entrepreneurship is examined in "Creativity at play: Content-creators and micro-entrepreneurship in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*", by Cátia Ferreira, Carla Ganito and Soraia Gonçalves. Through interviews and qualitative analysis, it explores how in-game tools and platform economies enable creative labor, including digital design and fan merchandise. The findings reveal games as ecosystems where participatory culture, monetization, and expressive engagement intersect.

The research titled "Designing for monetization: A taxonomy of dark patterns in top-grossing GaaS video games", by Sergio Gutiérrez-Manjón, Salvador Gómez-García and Gema Bonales-Damiel, analyses 2024's top free-to-play games, identifying aggressive dark design patterns used for monetization. Mobile titles exhibit the most predatory tactics, including opaque currencies and gambling-like mechanics. These findings highlight ethical risks regarding compulsive spending and emphasize the urgent need for stronger digital literacy, regulatory frameworks, and research into user self-regulation.

As analysis of Chilean indie games (2014-2024) is performed by José Agustín Donoso-Munita and Pablo Quiñonero-Pertusa in "Peripheral games: Chilean glocalization and the independent video game scene" reveals a significant trend toward "globalization." Despite high rates of original IP creation, the vast majority of titles prioritize international norms over local themes. By aligning with global media tropes, Chilean developers often favour market-driven standardization over the expression of distinct regional or national identities.

The work by Michael Walter "Immersive indies: On immersive strategies in independent games for virtual reality (VR)", argues that indie developers lead VR innovation due to a lack of mainstream pressure. Using the Player Immersive Experience (PIE) model and autoethnography, the study shows how implementing full virtual bodies and free movement enhances player agency and immersion, establishing new conventions in this emerging medium.

Finally, in "End of memories: Coming-of-age, love, loss, and friendship. Ludonarrative writing in indie games about Asia-Pacific", Alberto Porta-Pérez examines how Indonesian, Japanese, and Filipino indie titles use magical realism and diverse mechanics to explore adolescent identity crises. By analysing games like "A space for the unbound", researchers highlight how regional identities and distinct artistic styles shape narratives of social alienation and personal growth.

This collection underscores video games as vital drivers of creative and technical evolution, reshaping authorship and immersion in contemporary media. Ultimately, these studies bridge theory and practice, providing essential frameworks for navigating the industry's diverse and rapidly expanding future.

Joan Arnedo-Moreno is an associate professor at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) and director of the Master's in Video Game Design and Programming. A member of the GAME research group, he specializes in gamification, serious games, and technology-enhanced learning. He is also the founder and co-chair of the *Symposium on Gamification and Games for Learning (GamiLearn)*.

Marta Fernández-Ruiz is an associate professor at the Image Processing and Multimedia Technology Center (UPC) and coordinator of the Bachelor's Degree in Video Game Design and Development. She is a member of the DICODE research group, focusing on game studies, and a co-organizer of the Indie Games TRS conference and the *Symposium on Research in the Indie Video Game Industry (I3V)*.

Carles Sora-Domenjó is an associate professor and dean of the Image Processing and Multimedia Technology Center at Polytechnic University of Catalonia (UPC), and coordinator of the DICODE research group. Sora is an interdisciplinary scholar whose theoretical and practical research explores the intersections of technology, audiovisual and the arts. He is a former lecturer at Pompeu Fabra University (UPF) and postdoctoral fellow at MIT.

Lluís Anyó is an associate professor at the Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations of Ramon Llull University (URL) and the director of the University Master's Degree in Cultural Production and Communication. His research focuses on narrative and video games; he is a member of the STReaM research group and is also the author of the book *El jugador implicado. Videojuegos y narraciones*.

References

Anthropy, Anna (2012). Rise of the videogame zinesters: How freaks, normals, amateurs, artists, dreamers, drop-outs, queers, housewives, and people like you are taking back an art form. Seven Stories Press.

Chiapello, Laureline (2022). Creativity paradigms and game design research: A transdisciplinary approach. *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, *56*(1), 125-137.

Baecque, Antoine de (comp.) (2003). *La política de los autores*. Paidós.

Juul, Jesper (2019). Handmade pixels: Independent video games and the quest for authenticity. The MIT Press.

Moreno, Pedro Manuel (2003). El videojuego: Lecciones de la primera cultura multimedia. In Enrique Bustamante (ed.), *Hacia un nuevo sistema mundial de comunicación*. Gedisa.

Parker, Felan (2013). Indie game studies year eleven. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2013 Conference*.

Pérez Rufí, José Patricio (2015). *El modelo europeo de desarrollo de videojuegos*. Síntesis.

Ruffino, Paolo (Ed.). (2020*). Independent videogames: Cultures, networks, techniques and politics*. Routledge.

Sandovar, Asyea (2017). Going Indie. In Petri Lankoski and Jussi Holopainen (Eds), *Game design research* (pp. 171-198). ETC Press.

Tosca, Susana (2023). *Sameness and repetition in contemporary media culture*. Emerald Publishing Limited.

Vilasís-Pamos, Júlia; Fernández-Ruiz, Marta, and Sora-Domenjó, Carles (2024). El sector del videojoc indie a Catalunya: Anàlisi d'un ecosistema en creixement i amb projecció internacional. Generalitat de Catalunya. Departament de Cultura.

Tripodos, number 59 | 2026 | 11-30
ISSN: 1138-3305

Received: 12-05-25
Accepted: 06-10-25
OnlineFirst: 07-01-26
Final publication: 01-06-26

Cuphead as Playable Animation: Authorship, Aesthetics, and Visual Language in the Indie Video Game

Elisabet Fonts
Polytechnic University of Catalonia (Spain)

This article explores Cuphead *(Maddigan, 2020) as a paradigmatic example of aesthetic authorship in the independent video game scene. Rather than treating animation as a decorative or narrative supplement,* Cuphead *integrates traditional animation techniques, such as frame-by-frame drawing, watercolour backgrounds, and analogue visual effects, as the core language that structures the game's visual identity, mechanics, and emotional experience. From this perspective, the game is not merely a video game that features animation, but an animated work that comes to life through interaction.*

The study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology combining animation studies, game theory, and cultural analysis. Through an examination of characters, visual style, musical composition, and gameplay rhythm, the article demonstrates that Cuphead *operates as a "playable cartoon" in which animation, sound, and mechanics form an inseparable expressive system. The paper further discusses the role of authorship within the indie production model, highlight-*

Este artículo analiza Cuphead *(Maddigan, 2020) como un caso paradigmático de autoría estética en el contexto del videojuego independiente. Lejos de emplear la animación como un recurso decorativo o narrativo, el juego integra técnicas tradicionales, como la animación cuadro por cuadro, los fondos acuarelados y los efectos visuales analógicos, como núcleo estructural de su identidad visual, mecánica y expresiva. Desde esta perspectiva,* Cuphead *no es simplemente un videojuego que contiene animación, sino una animación tradicional que cobra vida mediante la interacción.*

El estudio adopta una metodología cualitativa e interdisciplinar que combina teoría de la animación, estudios del videojuego y análisis cultural. A través del análisis de personajes, estilo visual, música y jugabilidad, se demuestra que Cuphead *funciona como un "cartoon jugable" en el que animación, sonido y mecánicas forman un sistema expresivo integrado. Además, se examina el papel de la autoría en el modelo de producción indie, subrayando cómo la dirección creativa de los hermanos Moldenhauer configura una firma es-*

Doi.org/10.51698/tripodos.2026.59.01

ing how the creative direction of the Moldenhauer brothers contributes to a coherent aesthetic signature. Ultimately, Cuphead *is proposed as an auteur game that reinterprets early animation languages through a contemporary, interactive lens.*

Keywords: Cuphead*, playable animation, indie video games, authorship, visual aesthetics.*

tética coherente. En suma, el artículo propone que Cuphead *puede ser leído como una obra de autor que reinterpreta el legado de la animación clásica desde una lógica interactiva y contemporánea.*

Palabras clave: Cuphead*, animación jugable, videojuego independiente, autoría, estética visual.*

In recent years, the independent video game sector has fostered a notable proliferation of projects that break away from the dominant aesthetic and narrative conventions of the industry. In contrast to the hyperrealist logic and large-scale productions of so-called AAA titles, indie developments have established a space for creative freedom, formal experimentation, and authorial expression (Anthropy, 2012; Juul, 2019; Ruffino, 2020). Within this context, *Cuphead* (Maddigan, 2020) stands out as a paradigmatic case, both for its critical and commercial reception and for its uniquely distinctive visual proposal, rooted in the visual languages of early 20th-century traditional animation.

The game is notable for its use of classical techniques such as frame-by-frame animation, hand-painted backgrounds, and analog visual effects[1] that directly reference animated shorts from the 1930s, particularly the work of studios like Fleischer and the early productions of Walt Disney (Criado, 2019; Finch, 2011). This aesthetic revival is not merely driven by nostalgia or pastiche but rather emerges as a deliberate expressive strategy capable of generating new forms of meaning within the language of video games. The recurrent use of inherited styles in contemporary media should not be understood as a lack of innovation, but rather as a form of cultural recontextualization that can enable critical or affective readings (Tosca, 2023). Within this context, *Cuphead* reimagines traditional animation through an interactive logic, transforming visual nostalgia into a ludic and aesthetic experience.

While *The art of Cuphead* (Maddigan, 2020) provides an extensive account of the game's visual production process, this study differs from it by adopting an academic perspective grounded in animation theory, authorship studies, and

1 Analog visual effects: This term is used here to describe digitally simulated imperfections such as film grain, flicker, or cel irregularities that emulate the texture of pre-digital animation.

visual analysis. Rather than describing the making of the game, our approach seeks to interpret how *Cuphead* reconfigures the language of traditional animation through interactive design and aesthetic authorship.

Unlike other titles that use animation as a decorative, narrative, or aesthetic resource, *Cuphead* inverts the traditional model: it is not a video game that contains animation, but a playable animation, a piece of traditional animation that comes to life and gains meaning only through interaction. As will be further detailed in the following sections, unlike other titles that use animation merely as a decorative, narrative, or aesthetic resource, *Cuphead* inverts the traditional model: it is not a video game that contains animation, but a playable animation, a piece of traditional animation that comes to life and gains meaning only through interaction. This article's primary objective is to analyse *Cuphead* as a work in which animation does not serve a merely ornamental function, but a structural one. To this end, three specific objectives are proposed: to position *Cuphead* within the theoretical framework of authorship in independent video games, recognizing its aesthetic dimension as a potential authorial signature; to examine the visual and expressive resources that define the game's aesthetics; and to analyse the role of animation as the central language shaping both narrative and gameplay mechanics. The article proceeds from the premise that traditional animation in *Cuphead* functions as the backbone of the gaming experience: it defines its visual identity, guides the narrative through character expressiveness, and directly influences the mechanics and rhythms of interaction.

This approach aligns with the ongoing debate on authorship in indie video games, where creative control and aesthetic coherence allow for the recognition of an authorial voice (Baecque, 2003; Parker, 2014). In *Cuphead's* case, the direct involvement of the Moldenhauer brothers in its design strengthens this interpretation, placing the game within an aesthetic tradition defined by the critical reappropriation of past visual languages (Thomas and Johnston, 1995). Based on this foundation, the article argues that *Cuphead* can be understood as an auteur work that reinterprets classical animation through an interactive lens. Its analysis reveals how animation, far from being a decorative element, constitutes the aesthetic, narrative, and mechanical core of the game.

AESTHETICS AND AUTHORSHIP IN INDIE VIDEO GAMES

Over the past two decades, independent video games have emerged as fertile ground for aesthetic experimentation and authorial expression. Unlike titles produced by major studios, typically subject to industrial logics, large budgets, and hierarchical production chains, indie games have allowed small teams (sometimes even a single individual) to develop visual, narrative, and gameplay proposals that diverge from mainstream market conventions. This relative freedom has made indie games a privileged platform for exploring new forms of digital authorship and distinctive expressive languages (Juul, 2019; Perron, 2018).

Cuphead stands out strongly within this scene. Developed by Studio MDHR, a small team led by brothers Chad and Jared Moldenhauer, its creation is notable

not only for its scale but for its bold aesthetic vision. In contrast to the dominant models of digital realism or the vector minimalism common in other indie games, *Cuphead* embraces traditional animation inspired by 1930s cartoons. This choice is not merely a visual homage, but an aesthetic and cultural statement that positions the game within an alternative genealogy of video games, one that values visual craftsmanship, animated expressiveness, and organic integration between form and function.

Within this framework, it is important to consider how authorship in indie games is manifested through a recognizable aesthetic coherence. Authorship can persist even in collaborative media, provided there is clear creative direction, a stylistic signature, and a unifying vision (Baecque, 2003; Parker, 2014). In *Cuphead*, this authorship is reflected in a highly identifiable aesthetic, where every visual element, from character design to background texture and musical rhythm, follows a deliberate compositional logic. The result is a game where form is not decorative but structural, and where aesthetics become language.

In this context, traditional animation functions as a visual authorial signature: it is not merely a representational medium, but a system of thought. Animation can be understood as "a form of non-mimetic visual writing, capable of expressing concepts, emotions, and narrative structures through plastic movement" (Wells, 1998). In *Cuphead*, this translates into animation that does not aim to imitate reality, but to construct its own universe with unique visual, physical, and emotional rules. The choice of "rubber hose"[2] style is not just an homage; it is an expressive strategy that enables narrative and ludic elasticity rarely attainable through other visual means.

This link between aesthetics and authorship becomes even more relevant when examining the current state of indie game studies. Numerous works have highlighted the importance of visuality as a distinguishing feature of indie games in contrast to mainstream titles (Finch, 2011; Ruffino, 2020). Within this line of research, recent studies have focused on how aesthetics not only shape a game's identity but can also be understood as a narrative, emotional, and even mechanical device. In this sense, visual style ceases to be mere container and becomes content: a way of communicating, engaging the player, and constructing meaning.

The use of analogue and labour-intensive techniques, over 50,000 hand-drawn frames, watercolour-painted backgrounds, and 24-frames-per-second animation, reinforces this authorial conception. In a medium where digital technologies have standardized aesthetic norms, the choice of an "obsolete" style is not regressive, but radically creative. It represents a critical recovery of the past, in the sense of creative repetition: the reappropriation of old languages not as imitation but as a strategy of difference, as an artistic and cultural gesture (Tosca, 2023).

2 Rubber hose style: refers to the elastic, highly flexible animation typical of the 1920s and 1930s, characterized by exaggerated, fluid movement and simplified anatomy.

Furthermore, traditional animation operates in *Cuphead* as the cohesive core across all aspects of the game. There is no separation between the visual and the mechanical: everything is animated to be played. Mechanics respond to the rhythm of the animation; attacks are foreshadowed through expressive gestures; the backgrounds breathe, deform, and participate. This total integration recalls the logic of animated musicals, where music, action, and image are synchronized as a unified entity (Finch, 2011; Pastor, 2017). In *Cuphead*, animation organizes space, time, and tone, defining the game's identity as a whole.

Cuphead occupies an intersection between art, animation, and game design, which suggests that it can be interpreted as an auteur work. Here, animation is not a secondary channel but the central device through which the interactive experience is constructed. In contrast to the hyper productive logic of AAA games, *Cuphead* embraces slowness, craftsmanship, visual attention, and animated precision. Its aesthetics are not an effect, they are its structural and narrative core.

Although *Cuphead* remains the only title developed by Studio MDHR to date, its aesthetic project reveals a consolidated authorial signature. The direct involvement of Chad and Jared Moldenhauer in the artistic design, creative direction, and supervision of every aspect of development ensures an internal cohesion reflected at all levels of the game, from visual design to narrative rhythm and mechanical decisions.

Earlier examples such as *Dragon's Lair* (1983) and *Space Ace* (1984), both directed by former Disney animator Don Bluth, already explored the idea of animation as the core structure of gameplay. Although mechanically limited, these titles transformed the player's experience into an interactive cartoon. *Cuphead* reclaims that lineage but reimagines it through full player agency and contemporary animation craft, thus bridging historical and ludic traditions. In an environment where authorship is often diluted in collaborative structures, *Cuphead* manages to maintain a unified aesthetic and conceptual voice. While it is more difficult to establish an "authorial signature" without a comparative trajectory, as might be seen, for example, in Conrad Roset's work on *Gris* and *Neva*, the strength of *Cuphead's* visual proposal and its ability to extend beyond the game itself reinforce its value as an auteur work.

The expansion of *Cuphead* through comics, merchandise, and especially *The Cuphead Show!* (Netflix, 2022) demonstrates how the original aesthetics have functioned as the core identity of a recognizable intellectual property (Deke, 2024; MDHR Studios, 2024). A transmedia IP does not merely multiply content across formats; it organizes a coherent narrative universe in which each medium amplifies and re-signifies the original work (Scolari, 2013). Along these lines, *Cuphead's* retro-animated aesthetic acts as the guiding thread that enables the transfer of its identity to new platforms without losing cohesion. This dimension does not dilute the authorial proposal, it amplifies it. Transmedia expansion can strengthen the figure of the author as a world-builder, capable of projecting a sustained aesthetic vision across multiple formats (Jenkins, 2006).

The construction of a singular aesthetic universe, based on a critical re-reading of classical animation languages, is therefore not a nostalgic operation. It implies the projection of a creative vision across diverse cultural formats. From

this perspective, *Cuphead* can be understood not only as playable animation, but also as an auteur work that reconfigures the traditional boundaries between video game, animation, and interactive spectacle.

For all these reasons, it is fitting to consider *Cuphead* not as a video game with animation, but as playable animation, a piece that only comes to life through interaction. Rather than representing retro aesthetics, the game proposes a critical reactivation of classical animation languages from a contemporary, authorial, and ludic perspective (Criado, 2019).

Within this framework, *Cuphead* becomes a paradigmatic case, not only for its reinterpretation of a traditional visual language, but for doing so through a logic of authorship that permeates every aspect of its design (Juul, 2019). Its retro aesthetic is not a superficial nostalgic gesture, but an expressive strategy that places animation at the centre of the ludic experience. From this perspective, the game should not be analysed merely as a visually attractive product, but as a cohesive aesthetic proposal where authorship is manifested through style, form, and movement (Wells, 1998).

METHODOLOGY

While *Cuphead* draws inspiration from early animation aesthetics, its integration of these visual principles into the game's mechanics distinguishes it from earlier examples, where animation served primarily as spectacle rather than as a structural system of play. This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, focused on the textual, visual, and ludic analysis of the video game *Cuphead* (Maddigan, 2020). The research follows an interpretive analytical model, combining tools from animation studies, game theory, and cultural studies. The aim is to understand how traditional animation functions as a structural language within the gaming experience, articulating aesthetics, narrative, and interactivity.

The methodological procedure was structured into three phases. First, a visual and stylistic analysis of the game was conducted, with particular attention to character design, settings, and animated elements. This analysis was based on classical principles of animation, with special emphasis on squash and stretch, anticipation, timing, and exaggeration as expressive and functional mechanisms (Crafton, 1993; Thomas and Johnston, 1995).

Second, the visual expressiveness of the characters, both protagonists and enemies, was analysed. The study focused on animated design, gestures, and deformations, as well as the stylistic references to 1920s and 1930s classic animation, including figures such as Mickey Mouse, Betty Boop, and Cab Calloway. Screenshots and graphic comparisons were used to examine how animation generates narrative agency, emotion, and player engagement (Maddigan, 2020)

This qualitative approach follows a hermeneutic and semiotic framework, drawing from (Echo, 1989) notion of the *open work*, where meaning emerges through the interaction between text and reader in this case, between animation

and player. The analysis of visual language also integrates (McLuhan, 1964) media theory, which conceives animation as an extension of human perception, and (Barthes, 1977) concept of visual codes as applied to movement and gesture. These theoretical foundations provide a rigorous basis for interpreting *Cuphead*'s aesthetic and ludic dimensions, integrating visual, sonic, and interactive components into a unified interpretive framework. Similar methodological approaches can be found in Fernández-Vara's (2015) model of textual analysis for games and (Garin, 2019) study of visual gags in interactive media, both of which validate the use of aesthetic and semiotic analysis as legitimate tools within game studies.

Third, the musical dimension was addressed as a rhythmic extension of the visual language. The soundtrack composed by Kristofer Maddigan was studied in relation to its synchronization with animated action, articulating rhythm, tension, and expressiveness. This analysis was grounded in theoretical frameworks on narrative music (Gorbman, 1987; Tagg, 2013) and the historical references of classic animated musicals. This methodological approach allows us to frame *Cuphead* not only as a case study in visual design, but as an example of *playable animation*, where the principles of movement and rhythm define both aesthetics and interaction.

Playable Animation: A Unified Language of Aesthetics and Mechanics

One of *Cuphead's* most distinctive proposals is its conception of animation not as a decorative resource, but as a fundamental mechanical dimension of the game. Unlike other titles where visuals serve a secondary aesthetic function, in *Cuphead*, animation shapes the ludic experience on all levels: it anticipates actions, signals threat, sets rhythms, and structures interaction. The player doesn't just watch an animation, they play with it, interpreting gestures and patterns to make strategic decisions; they play within it, immersed in a visual choreography that organizes the space and timing of combat; and they play through it, deciphering visual transformations that guide their real-time actions. Thus, a true form of playable animation is configured, where aesthetics and mechanics merge into a single language.

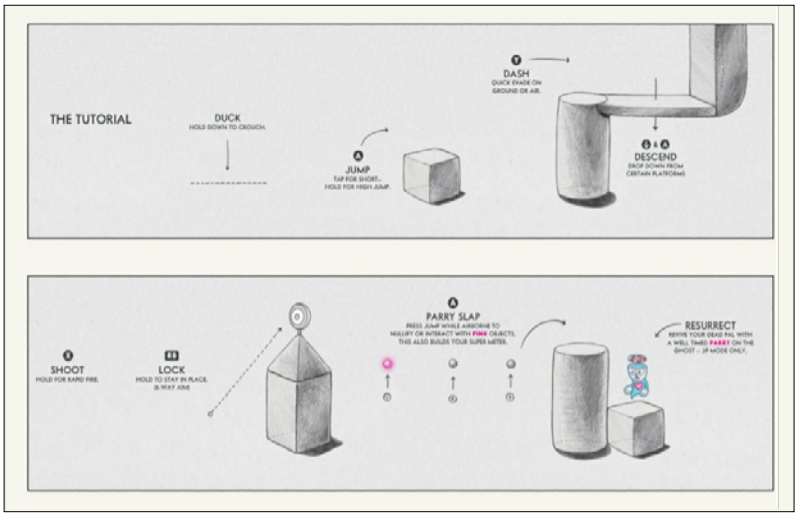
A particularly revealing example of this logic appears in the initial training screen, where the player learns the game's fundamental mechanics. This tutorial goes beyond merely explaining commands, it acts as a visual introduction to *Cuphead's* animated language. Jumping, shooting, parrying, and dodging are represented through exaggerated, clear movements within a graphic environment reminiscent of classic technical design. According to its creators, this sequence was conceived as a tribute to traditional animation art materials: they were inspired by technical drawings on blue paper, and photographed parchment using techniques that emulate stop-motion aesthetics, evoking the handmade, artisanal rhythm of 1930s animated shorts. This mise-en-scène, built with Bristol board and photographed outdoors using homemade methods, creates an effect that replicates the visual logic of early cartoons while introducing the player to the system of animated reading that defines the entire game (Maddigan, 2020).

Thus, the tutorial does more than teach how to play, it trains the player to read animation, establishing from the outset an aesthetic pedagogy based on gesture, rhythm, and anticipation.

One of the most revealing aspects of this integration between animation and gameplay is the choreography of gameplay itself: the way animated movements of enemies and protagonists function as precise visual signals that the player must read and interpret in real time. Each boss is presented as an animated sequence constructed through rhythm, anticipation, and transformation, which not only conveys expressiveness but organizes the phases of the battle (Cooper, 2019; Kalmanlehto, 2024).

As illustrated in Figure 1, the first image highlights the confrontation between characters through opposing lines of action (in red), which mark scenic tension. In the second image, one can observe the parabolic movement of the enemy character (in light purple) and its progressive deformation (in dark purple), exemplifying the use of the squash and stretch principle. The final two images clearly demonstrate the principle of anticipation: the enemy adopts an extended and rigid posture that signals an imminent attack on the protagonist, establishing a direct link between animation and mechanics (Williams, 2009).

Figure 1. Frame from the initial Cuphead tutorial, introducing the game's basic mechanics



Source: *The Art of Cuphead* (Maddigan, 2019).

In this sense, the classical principles of animation, anticipation, squash and stretch, timing, and exaggeration not only enhance expressiveness but function as the operative language through which the game communicates its rules (Thomas and Johnston, 1995). Gesture clarity allows the player to anticipate attacks, identify weak points, and react strategically. Thus, animation does not merely accompany gameplay: it structures, defines, and renders it legible.

Figure 2. Cinematic references for the main characters (Studio MDHR, 2017)

Source: Author's elaboration.

Moreover, this visual interaction is not limited to bosses or main characters. Environmental elements, far from being decorative, are also animated with mechanical intent. Moving platforms, objects that come to life, backgrounds that transform or generate active threats (such as hands emerging from the scene or collapsing structures) turn the setting into a dynamic component of the gameplay experience. This environmental animation, which in other games might serve as passive atmosphere, here becomes an active part of the challenge, contributing to the game's rhythm, difficulty, and expressive load (Cooper, 2019).

The game's very structure reinforces this logic. *Cuphead* adopts a boss rush format, a series of boss fights with minimal narrative transitions. This choice accentuates the rhythmic and visual dimension of the game: each battle functions

as a closed animated sequence, with its own tempo, visual transformation, and mechanical evolution. The player must constantly adapt to changes in rhythm and form, generating an intensely visual experience marked by emotional tension and temporal precision. This structure also enables visual learning: repeated patterns encourage the player to observe carefully, decipher gestures, and anticipate movements (Manovich, 2002).

Far from being a superficial stylistic layer, animation in *Cuphead* functions as a true visual game system. It operates as an autonomous language that informs, organizes, and sustains interaction through aesthetics. The player does not merely execute commands, they interpret and perform an animated score, where each gesture, transformation, or pause carries ludic implications. This integration makes the game a paradigmatic example of how animation can simultaneously function as an expressive device and a mechanical tool, blurring traditional boundaries between visual form and interactive function (Buchan, 2007).

VISUAL LANGUAGE, CHARACTERIZATION, AND ANIMATED MUSICALITY: AN EXPRESSIVE ANALYSIS OF 'CUPHEAD'S' CHARACTERS

Analysing the characters in *Cuphead* requires a dual approach: on the one hand, recognizing their roots in the visual archetypes of 1920s and 1930s animation, and on the other, examining their aesthetic, emotional, and mechanical roles within the game's overall design (Blair, 1994; Finch, 2011). In this context, characters operate not only as narrative or mechanical devices, but as symbolic nodes that concentrate cultural, affective, and ludic meanings. This section addresses how these three dimensions are constructed in both the protagonists and the main antagonists of the game.

One of the foundational pillars of *Cuphead's* aesthetic proposition lies in the design and animation of its characters. Far from functioning as mere playable avatars or mechanical enemies, these characters constitute a visual and expressive corpus that anchors the game in the tradition of classical animation, while simultaneously updating its conventions through interactivity. The game does not merely evoke past figures, it reinterprets them through a contemporary logic, integrating them into an experience defined by action, humor, and constant transformation. The following analysis explores how *Cuphead* builds its universe through the design of its heroes and villains, and how these characters embody formal, narrative, and mechanical principles that place them at the very core of the gameplay experience (Newman, 2008; Wolf and Baer, 2002).

Expressiveness, Design, and Visual References in 'Cuphead's' Characters

The universe of *Cuphead* is defined by the presence of characters that synthesize the heritage of classic animation with a contemporary interactive focus. Both heroes and villains are constructed through an animated logic that privileges

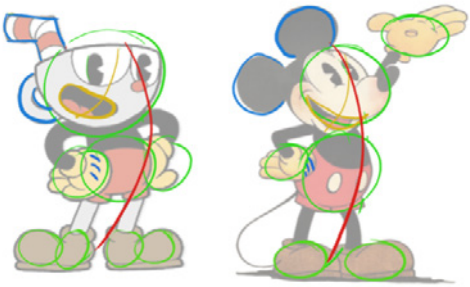
visual expressiveness, narrative economy, and formal iconicity. In this sense, characters are not just playable entities but aesthetic figures that function as carriers of meaning within the game's visual experience.

Animated Heroes: Between Homage and Agency

Cuphead and Mugman embody archetypes from 1920s and 1930s American cartoons. Their references are evident: Mickey Mouse, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, Felix the Cat, and Bimbo. Their elastic bodies, "pie-eyed" cutouts, rubber hose limbs, and rounded proportions place them squarely within the visual imagination of *Silly Symphonies* (1939), or the early *Looney Tunes*. Their design emphasizes charm and approachability, reinforced by constant, bouncy, and rhythmic animation that transmits energy to the player (Kothenschulte, 2021b; Maddigan, 2020).

Cuphead, in particular reflects a rebellious and optimistic personality, inheriting the spirit of Mickey Mouse's resilience during the Great Depression (Finch, 2011). He is described as "a headstrong optimist whose confidence and love for adventure may come off as reckless, but who ultimately means well" (Bergen, 2018; Corse, 2018; Maddigan, 2020). His silhouette is designed to be recognizable: the handles on his head function as ears, an explicit homage to Mickey, and his line of action conveys dynamism and balance. The use of red in his outfit not only distinguishes him from his brother but also provides strong visual contrast with backgrounds and enemies.

Figure 3. Comparative visual analysis between Cuphead and Mickey Mouse



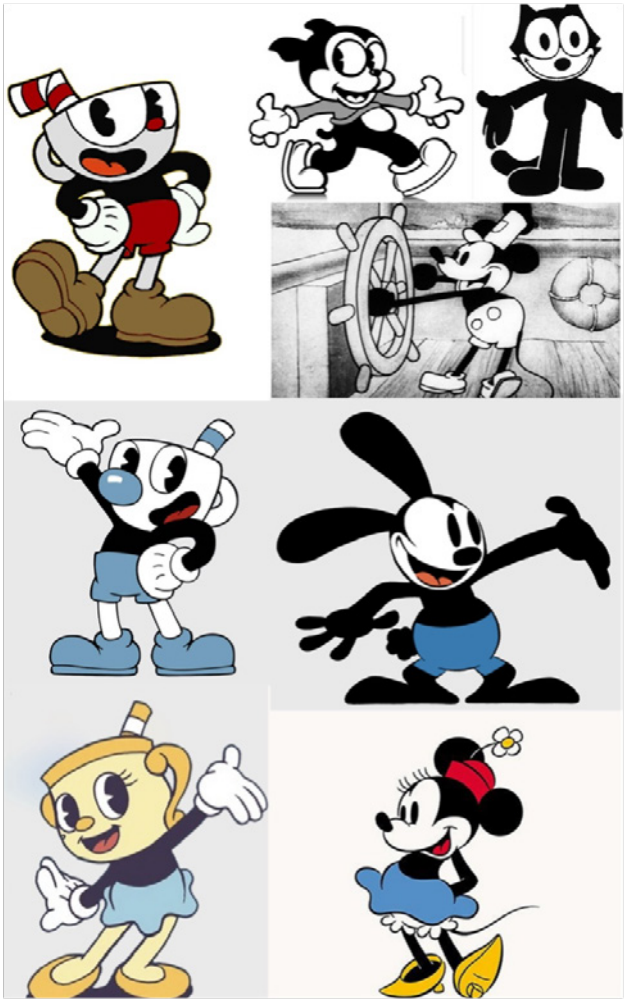
Source: Author's elaboration.

Mugman, by contrast, serves as a more cautious and gentler counterpart. His blue colouring, traditionally assigned to the second player, establishes a complementary visual dynamic with *Cuphead*. Although the differences between them are subtle (a slightly larger nose, for example), the chromatic, attitudinal, and gestural contrast helps reinforce his identity. His design evokes characters like Oswald, accentuating a more innocent, even childlike, aura.

Ms. Chalice, introduced as a playable character in the expansion *The Delicious Last Course* (2022), represents a significant evolution within the *Cuphead*

universe. Although she first appears as a secondary character in the base game, it is in the DLC that she assumes narrative and mechanical protagonism. Inspired by characters such as Minnie Mouse (Bergen, 2018; Corse, 2018; MDHR Studios, 2024), Ms. Chalice draws from classic cartoon elements while subverting them through a contemporary lens. Her visual design departs from the traditional chromatic canon: the combination of soft yellow, sky blue, and white details avoids colours typically associated with femininity in historical animation. Her rounded shape, amplified facial expressiveness, and simple yet distinctive costume gives her a clear and recognizable silhouette, designed both for visual distinction and to emphasize her character.

Figura 4. Cinematic references for King Dice, The Devil and Cala Maria



Source: Author's elaboration.

Narratively, Ms. Chalice marks a paradigm shift: no longer relegated to the passive or secondary roles traditionally occupied by female figures in 1930s cartoons (Smoodin, 1993), she emerges as an active, autonomous heroine with her own narrative arc. Her presence drives the DLC's storyline, and her actions directly affect the original protagonists, *Cuphead* and Mugman. Mechanically, she introduces a new set of abilities, double jump, aerial dodge, and roll attack, that transform the gameplay experience. These mechanics not only broaden the player's options but are articulated through an agile, dance-like animated gesturalism that aligns with her energetic and curious personality.

From an emotional and expressive perspective, Ms. Chalice elicits an ambivalent player response: she blends tenderness, charisma, and strength. She is not a simple homage but a critical reinterpretation of the female role in the animation tradition. In this sense, her inclusion in *Cuphead* not only diversifies the cast but enriches the visual universe with a character who embodies, aesthetically, kinetically, and ludically a form of animated emancipation (Ryan, 2015; Wolf and Baer, 2002).

Theatrical Villains: Animation as Performance

The bosses in *Cuphead* are not merely functional enemies; each one is a theatrical piece with its own visual and narrative identity. Their design draws on overlapping references from classic animation, vaudeville, 1930s musicals, and comic horror cinema.

King Dice is perhaps the most iconic. Inspired by Cab Calloway, Clark Gable, Dick Tracy villains, and characters such as the Coachman from *Pinocchio (1940)*, King Dice combines elegance and menace (Maddigan, 2020). His design revives the archetype of the vaudeville villain with an angular silhouette, syncopated jazz movements, and theatrically arrogant expressions (Crafton, 1993). The scene in which he appears is visually inspired by Gunstar Heroes' Dice Palace, reimagined through a 1930s aesthetic. More than just a villain, he also acts as a master of ceremonies. His visual identity is sustained by a sharp silhouette that conveys authority and sophistication (Bendazzi, 2017). His dice-shaped head functions as an immediate visual emblem, while his purple suit and white gloves consolidate his performative nature. His movements during combat are animated with extreme fluidity, as if he were dancing jazz. This not only emphasizes his flamboyant style but introduces a visual rhythm the player must follow to anticipate his attacks. The character subverts the traditional final boss role: he is not the ultimate villain, but certainly the most theatrical and arguably the most memorable, due to his stylistic impact.

The Devil, the game's primary antagonist, is constructed as a synthesis of multiple animated demons: *Hell's Bells* (1929), *Red Hot Mamma* (1934), *Fantasia* (1940), and the designs of *Ghouls 'n Ghosts* (1988). His animation shifts from caricatured gestures to grotesque deformations, evoking Lucifer, Mephistopheles, and the great final bosses of classic video games. His facial expressiveness is inspired by *Night on Bald Mountain* (1940), and his multiple transformations, goat, snake, insect, render him a multiform, symbolically unstable entity. As the final antagonist, he represents the visual and symbolic culmination of animated

fears from the past. His design leans more toward the mischievous demon archetype than the embodiment of absolute evil: pointy ears, exaggerated grin, thin mustache. However, the animation that shapes him is unstable, constantly changing form, expression, and size. This fluidity turns him into a shifting threat that challenges the player's visual reading. The references to *Fantasia* and *Hell's Bells* (1929) not only provide an aesthetic genealogy but place the Devil within a tradition of antagonists that combine spectacle and disturbance. Each transformation during the fight is not merely a mechanical phase, but a visual mutation that alters the rhythm of combat and demands strategic recalibration.

Figura 5. Cinematic references for King Dice, The Devil, and Cala Maria

Source: Author's elaboration.

As discussed in *The Art of Cuphead* (Maddigan, 2020) Cala Maria's design draws inspiration from "famous fun-loving female characters from classic animation, including Betty Boop and Popeye's Olive Oyl", as well as references such as *Moth and the Flame* (Disney, 1938) and Madame Medusa from *The Rescuers* (1977), paying homage to Milt Kahl and other expressive animators of Disney's classical era. She articulates an ambiguous femininity that blends animated eroticism with grotesque horror. Her design is built around soft curves, large eyes, and flirtatious gestures, but her metamorphosis into a sea monster reveals a sinister underside that subverts the player's expectations. Her expressiveness is enhanced through undulating animation and seductive pauses that contrast with visually complex attacks, such as the petrifying gaze or the appearance of aquatic creatures. Cala Maria embodies animated hybridity: she is a sexualized figure, a visual threat, and a fantastical creature. The sophistication of her animation reinforces the unease she provokes, as her initial beauty gives way to aesthetic and mechanical dissonance.

In all cases, *Cuphead's* villains are constructed as dramatic figures. Their animation relies on squash and stretch, anticipation, and rhythmic exaggeration (Thomas and Johnston, 1995), granting them both imposing stage presence and functional clarity. Their gestures inform the player about combat mechanics: animation communicates the imminence of danger, transitions between phases, or moments of vulnerability. Each boss becomes a ludic choreography were visual aesthetics guide strategy. Each boss becomes a ludic choreography where visual aesthetics guide strategy. Beyond the characters explicitly discussed in *The Art of Cuphead*, additional visual affinities can be traced to figures such as Madame Medusa from *The Rescuers* (Disney, 1977) or the demonic iconography of *Night on Bald Mountain* in *Fantasia* (1940), which further reinforce the game's dialogue with the expressive and theatrical heritage of classical animation.

What unites heroes and villains in *Cuphead* is their ability to express themselves without words. Animation produces "living matter": bodies that do not imitate reality but instead create the symbolic, the affective, and the rhythmic. This expressiveness not only builds atmosphere it shapes the player's experience (Wells, 1998). The emotions these characters elicit, tension, tenderness, unease, admiration, arise from their animated behaviour. The game does not require complex psychological development: the characters are endearing because they deform, shrink, panic, or celebrate in every frame. In *Cuphead*, animation does not represent it acts. And that visual action is simultaneously narrative, mechanical, and emotional.

MUSIC AS PART OF THE INTERACTIVE ANIMATED LANGUAGE

The music in *Cuphead*, composed by Kristofer Maddigan, serves as a central axis of the game's expressive system. Far from fulfilling a merely ornamental or atmospheric function, the soundtrack is deeply integrated into the design logic and the player's sensory experience. It is animated music in the literal sense: it accompanies movement, emphasizes it, translates it into rhythm, and transforms it into gameplay structure (Wolf and Baer, 2002).

Performed by a live jazz orchestra, the soundtrack is composed of a wide variety of styles linked to the musical traditions of the 1920s and 1930s, including swing, ragtime, big band, and symphonic jazz (Gorbman, 1987). This selection is not solely driven by a retro aesthetic ambition it aligns with the broader artistic project: just as the animation emulates past techniques through frame-by-frame drawing and watercolour backgrounds, the music revives the sound codes of the golden age of animation to construct a coherent and multisensory experience (Kothenschulte, 2021).

Each level features an original composition tailored to its visual setting, combat rhythm, and the personality of the corresponding boss. The music acts as an anticipatory system, signalling phase changes, intensifying tension, or modulating the speed and emotional tone of the encounter. In this sense, it fulfils an informative, emotional, and mechanical function. Players learn to interpret musical variations as cues that accompany or foreshadow, key transformations in the game's narrative (Dixon, 2008).

This close relationship between music and movement recalls the historical model of Disney's *Silly Symphonies* (1939), or the Fleischer Studios' shorts, where music dictated the visual tempo of animation (Crafton, 1993; Merritt and Kaufman, 2016). *Cuphead* takes up this tradition and reformulates it in an interactive key: it is not just audiovisual synchronization but ludic integration. In certain levels, the syncopated rhythm marks the optimal moment to dodge, attack, or shift strategies, making the music an invisible guide for the gameplay choreography.

From both a technical and symbolic standpoint, the fact that all pieces were recorded with real instruments reinforces the artisanal nature of the project. This decision not only adds sonic richness but also establishes continuity with the handcrafted logic of traditional animation. *Cuphead's* music, like its visual aesthetics, appeals to an idea of authenticity that does not rely on historical fidelity but on the critical recovery of obsolete forms to give them new meaning within the interactive environment (Cohen, 1993).

Thus, music is not a supplement to animation, but a rhythmic extension of its language. Together, they configure a sensory reading system in which seeing, hearing, and playing intertwine to build a unique aesthetic experience. This convergence confirms that in *Cuphead*, each visual, sonic, and mechanical dimension is part of a shared choreography, where animation, like music, becomes the true language of the game (MDHR Studios, 2024).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that *Cuphead* is not simply a visually striking indie title, but an exemplary case of how classical animation can be reimagined as a foundational language for interactive experiences. Rather than serving as a stylistic embellishment, animation in *Cuphead* operates as a mechanical, narrative, and expressive system an axis around which the entire gaming experience revolves (Criado, 2019). This model challenges the conventional separation between form

and function, aesthetics and gameplay, inviting a redefinition of animation as a structural grammar within the language of video games.

Cuphead embodies a distinctive visual and conceptual signature, closely linked to the creative leadership of the Moldenhauer brothers. Their direct involvement in artistic direction, character design, and animation aesthetics ensures a stylistic coherence that resonates with auteur theory. Despite the collaborative nature of game development, the project reveals a clear creative voice grounded in aesthetic cohesion and formal consistency qualities that position it within the ongoing debate on independent game creation and creative authorship (Parker, 2014; Ruffino, 2020).

A key contribution of this article lies in its articulation of *Cuphead* as "playable animation" a concept that bridges animation studies, ludology, and digital aesthetics. The expressive capacity of animation in the game is not limited to visual flair but extends to the mechanical structure of gameplay. Classic animation principles such as anticipation, squash and stretch, and exaggeration become functional cues for interpreting timing, threat, and interaction. This expressive-functional integration also extends to the soundtrack: the jazz compositions of Kristofer Maddigan, performed by a live orchestra, do not merely accompany the visual experience but synchronize rhythm, guide decision-making, and sustain ludic tension.

In this sense, *Cuphead* is not just a stylistic homage to the past, it is a critical reactivation of obsolete forms that finds new meaning through interactivity. Its aesthetic choices are deliberate and interwoven with gameplay mechanics, reaffirming that creative innovation can arise not only from technological novelty but from cultural recontextualization and artisanal production (Juul, 2019; Tosca, 2023). The manual labour behind its visuals and music, frame-by-frame animation, watercolour backgrounds, live-recorded music, embodies a form of resistance to the standardization of digital aesthetics and reiterates the value of craft in an era of procedural generation and algorithmic design (Maddigan, 2020; Thomas and Johnston, 1995).

This integrated analysis also aligns with current concerns in indie game studies about the boundaries between media formats. *Cuphead* occupies a liminal space between animation, musical, and game, dissolving distinctions between the audiovisual and the interactive. Its expansion into other mediamost notably *The Cuphead Show!* illustrates how a coherent aesthetic vision can transcend formats without losing unity. This reinforces the creative potential of indie games as cultural works capable of shaping broader symbolic ecosystems (Deke, 2024).

Future research might explore how other contemporary indie titles employ similar strategies of aesthetic reappropriation, musical integration, or mechanical stylization. Equally relevant would be to study how retro animation techniques are being used today in resistance to digital uniformity, or how "playable animation" might become a distinct genre or design philosophy. *Cuphead*, in this light, offers both a model and a provocation: a model for interdisciplinary analysis and a provocation to reconsider where the limits of animation, authorship, and game design truly lie.

Ultimately, this study reaffirms that animation in *Cuphead* is not a visual accessory, but a total language a convergence of sight, sound, and mechanics. Its success as an indie game underscores the creative potential of small-scale production, and its enduring impact confirms that artistic innovation in video games can emerge through the intelligent fusion of tradition and interactivity. By engaging the player not only visually and narratively but kinaesthetically and rhythmically, *Cuphead* redefines what animation can do and what games, at their most expressive, can become.

Elisabet Fonts. PhD in Science and New Technologies and a Bachelor's degree in Audiovisual Communication. She is the academic director of the postgraduate program in Technical Artist for Videogames and a lecturer at the Polytechnic University of Catalonia (CITM). As a coordinator of final degree projects and researcher within the DiCode – Digital Culture and Creative Technologies group, her teaching focuses on 3D and 2D animation as well as digital art in various areas. She has also collaborated with the University of Barcelona, the University of Vic, and ESCAC. In addition, she provides audiovisual services for The Walt Disney Company on ESPN, the US sports channel. She is also a contributor at Cadena SER, where she participates in cultural and entertainment programs.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9412-181X

References

Anthropy, Anna (2012). *Rise of the videogame zinesters : How freaks, normals, amateurs, artists, dreamers, dropouts, queers, housewives, and people like you are taking back an art form*. Seven Stories Press.

Baecque, A. de (2003). *La política de los autores: Manifiestos de una generación de cinéfilos*. Paidós.

Barthes, Roland (1977). *Image, music, text*. In Philosophy & Rhetoric (Issue 3). Fontana Press.

Bendazzi, Giannalberto (2017). *Animation : A world history*. Vol. I. Foundations - The Golden Age. Routledge.

Bergen, Edward (2018). *The pictorial story of Walt Disney's first superstar: Mickey Mouse*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Blair, Preston (1994). *Cartoon Animation - Interactive Book*. 224. Quarto Publishing Group USA.

Buchan, Suzanne (2007). *Animated "Worlds"* 207. John Libbey Publishing.

Cohen, Annabel (1993). Music as a source of emotion in film. In Patrik N. Juslin and John Sloboda, *Handbook of music and emotion: Theory, research, applications* (pp. 878-908). https://doi.org/10.1093/ACPROF:OSO/9780199230143.003.0031

Cooper, Jonathan (2019). *Game anim: A complete guide to video game animation*. CRC Press/Taylor & Francis Group.

Corse, Nicole (2018). *Mickey Mouse Museum: The story of an icon*. Studio Press.

Crafton, Donald (1993). *Before Mickey: Animated Film 1898-1928*. Chicago University Press.

Criado, José Manuel Palenzuela (2019). *Cuphead y el futuro de la industria audiovisual*. *Con A de Animacion*, (9), 14-18. https://doi.org/10.4995/CAA.2019.11326

Deke, Deeki (2024). *The art of the Cuphead show*. Dark Horse Books.

Dixon, Wheeler Winston (2008). *Tunes for Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon*. In University of California Press (Vol. 25, Issue 4). University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1080/10509200601105514

Echo, Umberto (1989). The poetics of open work. In *The poetics of work*. Harvard University Press.

Fernández-Vara, Clara (2015). *Introduction to game analysis*. Routledge.

Finch, Christopher (2011). *El arte de Walt Disney: De Mickey Mouse a Toy Story*. Lunwerg.

Garin, Manuel (2019). *El gag visual: De Buster Keaton a Super Mario (Signo e imagen)* Shangrila.

Gorbman, Claudia (1987). *Unheard melodies: Narrative film music*. BFI Publishing; Indiana University Press.

Jenkins, Henry (2006). *Convergence culture*. NYU Press.

Juul, Jesper (2019). *Handmade pixels: Independent video games and the quest for authenticity*. MIT Press.

Kalmanlehto, Johan (2024). Aesthetics of agency and the rhythm of gameplay. *Games and Culture*, *19*(8), 1038-1054. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231185630

Kothenschulte, Daniel (2021b). *Los archivos de Walt Disney: Sus películas de animación*.

Maddigan, Kristofer (2020). *The art of Cuphead*. Dark Horse Books.

Manovich, Lev (2002). *The language of new media*. MIT Press.

McLuhan, Marshall (1964). Understanding media the extensions of man. In *Basieexpsispittedu*. McGraw-Hill.

MDHR Studios (2024). *The art of Cuphead: The delicious last course*. Dark Horse Book.

Merritt, Russell and Kaufman, J. B. (2016). *Walt Disney's silly symphonies: A companion to the classic cartoon series*. Disney Editions.

Newman, James (2008). *Playing with videogames*. Routledge.

Parker, Felan (2014). *Indie games studies year eleven*. DiGRA Digital Library, (1). https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2013i1.683

Pastor, Doc (2017). *¡Hasta el infinito y más allá!: Pixar a través de sus películas*. Dolmen.

Perron, Bernard (2018). *The world of scary video games: A study in videoludic horror*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Ruffino, Paolo (2020). *Independent videogames: Cultures, networks, techniques and politics*. Routledge Advances in Game Studies.

Ryan, Marie-Laure (2015). *Narrative as virtual reality 2: Revisiting immersion and interactivity in literature and electronic media*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Scolari, Carlos Alberto (2013). *Narrativas transmedia: Cuando todos los medios cuentan*. Deusto.

Smoodin, Eric (1993). *Animating culture: Hollywood cartoons from the sound era*. Roundhouse.

Studio MDHR (2017). *Cuphead* [Video game]. Studio MDHR Entertainment.

Tagg, Philip (2013). *Music's meanings : A modern musicology for non-musos*. Media Music Scholar's Press, Ed.

Thomas, Frank and Johnston, Ollie (1995). The illusion of life: Disney animation. In *Physics and Visualisation*. Abbeville Press Inc. U.S.

Tosca, Susana (2023). *In Sameness and Repetition in Contemporary Media Culture*. Emerald Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/9781804559529

Wells, Paul (1998). *Understanding animation*. Routledge.

Williams, Richard (2009). *The animator's survival kit. In The animator's survival kit*. Faber and Faber.

Wolf, Mark J. P. and Baer, Ralph H. (2002). *The medium of the video game*. University of Texas Press.

Tripodos, number 59 | 2026 | 31-50
ISSN: 1138-3305

Received: 09-06-25
Accepted: 24-09-25
OnlineFirst: 26-01-26
Final publication: 01-06-26

Beyond Mechanics: An Actor-Network Perspective on Narrative Design in Indie Video Games

Şafak Topçu
Özyeğin University (Istanbul, Turkey)
Metin Çavuş
Özyeğin University (Istanbul, Turkey)

Video-game stories are rarely written just once; they grow through ongoing conversations among people, tools, and market forces. This article, guided by Actor-Network Theory (ANT), examines narrative design in small and indie studios as a dynamic socio-technical network rather than a single-author craft. Drawing on more than 400 quotations from practitioners, six semi-structured interviews, and expert sources such as GDC talks, we identify thirteen recurring "actors" and visualize the strength of their connections. Four relationships prove especially influential: Story ↔ Player, Genre, Technology, and Budget/ Production plan. Our analysis shows how imagined players steer plot pacing, how genre conventions stabilize early ideas while shaping expectations, how engines and toolchains open new possibilities yet impose unseen limits, and how financial constraints can compress or redirect branching storylines. The study pushes discussion beyond mechanics, demonstrating that video-game narratives emerge from a rich interplay of creative, technical, and commercial forces rather than gameplay systems alone.

Las historias de los videojuegos rara vez se escriben una sola vez; crecen mediante conversaciones continuas entre personas, herramientas y fuerzas de mercado. Este artículo, guiado por la Teoría del Actor-Red (ANT), examina el diseño narrativo en estudios pequeños e independientes como una red sociotécnica dinámica, en lugar de un proceso de autoría individual. A partir de más de 400 citas de profesionales, seis entrevistas semiestructuradas y fuentes expertas como charlas de la GDC, identificamos trece "actores" recurrentes y visualizamos la intensidad de sus conexiones. Cuatro relaciones resultan especialmente influyentes: Historia ↔ Jugador, Género, Tecnología y Presupuesto/ Plan de producción. Nuestro análisis muestra cómo los jugadores imaginados orientan el ritmo de la trama; cómo las convenciones de género estabilizan ideas iniciales a la vez que moldean expectativas; cómo los motores y las cadenas de herramientas abren nuevas posibilidades pero imponen límites invisibles; y cómo las restricciones financieras pueden comprimir o redirigir tramas ramificadas. El estudio lleva el debate más allá de las mecánicas, demostran-

Doi.org/10.51698/tripodos.2026.59.02

Keywords: *video game, actor-network theory, narrative design, genre constraints, economic constraints.*

do que las narrativas de los videojuegos emergen de una rica interacción de fuerzas creativas, técnicas y comerciales, y no solo de los sistemas de juego.

Palabras clave: *videojuego, teoría del actor-red, diseño narrativo, restricciones de género, restricciones económicas.*

This article presents a segment of ongoing research that delves into video game narratives and the actors who shape the narrative design process. Our aim in this article is to reframe video game narratives as emergent outcomes of dynamic and interconnected design processes, instead of a static one. Instead of adopting structuralist or essentialist perspectives, we stress that narrative design is shaped by the interaction of many actors, such as designers, writers, technology, market forces, gameplay, etc. Each actor within this complex process shows varying degrees of influence, competing or cooperating in different ways to shape the final narrative experience of the video game. This reality is much more apparent in the case of video game entrepreneurs. To achieve our goal, we employ a deductive rather than inductive approach, not to validate our pre-constructed ideas about how narrative in games should function, but instead to let the voices of key actors involved in the narrative design process be heard. We strengthen our arguments by integrating multiple data collection techniques, such as books written by professionals, interviews that are present online with professionals, and last but not least, interviews we conducted with video game entrepreneurs.

In examining video game narratives, scholars have traditionally employed frameworks rooted in structuralist perspectives, which emphasize narrative coherence and fixed storytelling structures (Aarseth, 1997; Ryan, 2006), or auteur theory, which prioritizes the singular vision of individual creators (DeWinter and Kocurek, 2017; Parker, 2013). While structuralism aims to uncover universal narrative structures influenced by literary traditions and classic dramaturgy (Aristotle, trans. 1920; Jenkins, 2004), auteur theory foregrounds the creative autonomy and distinctive personal styles of individual developers or studios, drawing parallels with concepts from film studies (DeWinter and Kocurek, 2017). Although both approaches offer valuable insights, they often overlook narrative design's inherently collaborative and emergent nature specific to video games, particularly in indie game contexts where development processes are notably fluid and networked (Juul, 2019; Ruffino, 2020; Freeman *et al*., 2020).

Consequently, we borrow Bruno Latour's (2007) Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as our primary framework to uncover the complex relationships among

these actors. This framework helps us map the relationships between human and non-human elements, demonstrating how narratives are co-created through this network of influence. ANT as a sociological theory is a meta-theory that flattens the hierarchy between human and non-human actors with the aim of understanding the complexities of socio-technological processes. Unlike traditional sociological theories that focus primarily on human interactions, ANT has a total symmetry, making it much more favourable to understand the roles of non-human elements such as technologies, tools, materials, and regulations.

The key concepts of ANT are Actors, Networks, and Translation. Networks are formed by webs of actors' relationships that dynamically evolve as they interact. In the case of video game design, the whole process of design can be an example of a network. Actors (or actants) are the primary entities that interact within the network, and they can be either human or non-human. Applied to the network of game design, they can be game designers, players, game engines, software tools, gaming platforms, etc. Translation, on the other hand, refers to how actors align their interests, cooperate, and interact to achieve a stable network towards a common goal —such as producing a video game. Being an un-hierarchical, holistic approach, ANT aligns perfectly with the complex network of video game development. As Bruno Latour states (2017), "It is utterly impossible to understand what holds society together without reinjecting in its fabric the facts manufactured by natural and social sciences and the artifacts designed by engineers".

Previous ANT studies in game research have tended to center the player (Hung, 2016) or the game itself (Jessen and Jessen 2014) as primary actor of the network built. While both approaches were fruitful, our study, in contrast adopts ANT's principle of symmetry, treating all actors —human and non-human— as equally capable of affecting the network. Additionally, Cypher and Richardson (2006) apply ANT to analyse the gameplay experience of the final product (particularly in multiplayer online games) whereas our focus is on the production process itself. By not positioning any actor as a central or primary actor we identify a variety of actors involved in the narrative design process by simply "following the actors themselves" (Latour, 2007). We propose a novel, empirically grounded approach to narrative design as a negotiated, networked process.

In this article, by leveraging ANT as our main analytical framework, we present a novel way of understanding the narrative design in video games. Rather than portraying it as a static, foolproof, deterministic process, we demonstrate that it is, in reality, a dynamic and emergent network of multiple actors both competing and collaborating. With a data-driven approach from professionals, we also identify the most important actors, which will be presented in the following section of the Research Methodology. This shift from seeing narrative design as a fixed process to a network of actors, as well as the identification of the key actors within the network, is central to the paper's contribution to the field.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section outlines our research process, resource selection, data collection, analysis, and network construction. By 'network construction', we mean identifying key actors within the narrative design process and mapping their relationships as well as their translations, guided by ANT. As stated in the introduction, we centred our research on the perspectives of industry, therefore it is grounded in three essential resources: non-academic books authored by professionals, open-access videos and seminars, and interviews with video game entrepreneurs. For books, we selected works including *Slay the Dragon: Writing Great Video Games* (Bryant and Giglio, 2015), *Narrative Design for Indies* (McRae, 2017), *The Ultimate Guide to Video Game Writing and Design* (Dille and Platten, 2008), *Video Game Storytelling* (Skolnick, 2014), and *The Game Narrative Toolbox* (Heussner *et al*., 2015). For open-access videos and seminars, we utilized a variety of resources, with particular attention to materials from the *Game Design Roundtable* and presentations at the *Game Developers Conference* (GDC). Lastly, we interviewed six small-studio professionals: a Roblox IP adaptor, a solo creator of a 16-bit JRPG, a hyper-casual mobile game designer, a lead developer of a social card-battler, a trivia-puzzle producer, and a 12-person director of a narrative-adventure game. We conducted semi-structured interviews online, recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim while anonymising all personal and studio identifiers. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. We focused on small-sized game development studios to enable a localized ANT analysis: compact teams allow us to trace translations end to end across the production pipeline, where enrolments, negotiations, and constraints are more directly observable. Because resources are limited in such settings, actors tend to collaborate and negotiate more often than AAA organizations.

After data collection, we conducted a qualitative coding process informed by grounded theory techniques and guided by Actor-Network Theory, similar to Jessen and Jessen (2014). We iteratively annotated practitioner discourse and extracted quotes directly related to video-game narrative, yielding over 400 samples. Through open coding, initial themes emerged in developers' own terms including genre agnosticism, ludonarrative dissonance, player synchronization, branching narrative, physical constraints, and others. We then conducted axial coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2014) to relate these themes and identify the actors that organize them. For example, because cost and budget issues emerged across branching narrative, player synchronization and physical constraints, axial coding linked these themes to the actor Price (Cost/Money) as a mediating influence. The identified actors include Story, Mechanics (or Gameplay), Emotions, Tone (or Rythm), Player, Character, Production Plan, Context, Genre, Aesthetics, Level Design (or In Game Environment), Technology (or Game engine), and, notably, Price (or Cost/Money).

Next, we re-categorized the corpus by actor, selecting quotes that referenced two or more actors to capture inter-actor dynamics. Co-mentions within the same coded segment were aggregated into a frequency-based relationship matrix (Table 1). For instance, the Story-Genre pair co-occurred 10 times, whereas the

Story-Player co-occurred 31 times. We treat frequency as an indicator of salience, not causality. This pipeline of open coding, axial coding, actor definition and co-mention aggregation operationalized ANT's directive to —follow the actors— and provided the empirical basis for the network of narrative design reported here. Subsequent semi-structured interviews were used to elaborate and refine the identified actors and their relationships.

While our analysis reveals many relationships, this essay will focus specifically on those involving the actor of Story. Although Mechanics (or Gameplay) as an actor has a significant impact on Story, we do not discuss this relationship further, as it has been extensively examined in previous studies (e.g., Hocking, 2007; Ryan, 2006; Crick, 2011). That said, the presence of Mechanics in the relationship matrix underscores its central role which we do not dispute. Instead, we acknowledge this centrality but move beyond that, in line with the article's title.

To maintain a manageable scope, we will focus primarily on the most significant connections: Story's relationships with Player, Genre, Technology, and the combined influence of Price and Production Plan due to their intrinsic interconnectedness.

Table 1. Relationship matrix of actors in video game narratives

	Story	Mechanics	Emotion	Tone and Rythm	Player	Character	Production Plan	Context	Genre	Aesthetics	Level Design	Technology	Price
Story	0	19	1	7	31	5	13	5	10	5	8	12	7
Mechanics	19	0	3	3	4	5	0	3	3	1	2	2	3
Emotion	1	3	0	0	7	1	0	0	0	1	2	0	0
Tone and Rythm	7	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Player	31	4	7	1	0	14	0	1	4	1	3	1	4
Character	5	5	1	0	14	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Production Plan	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	0	0
Context	5	3	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Genre	10	3	0	0	4	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
Aesthetics	5	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	3	1
Level Design	8	2	2	0	3	1	2	0	0	1	0	1	0
Technology	12	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	3	1	0	1
Price	7	3	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0

Source: Own elaboration.

STORY AND PLAYER: THE ROLE OF PLAYER IN NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT

The Player —the most complex actor in a game's narrative network— both shapes and is shaped by the story. We conceptualize the Player as occupying three overlapping roles: the Imagined Player, the Active Player, and the Perceiving Player.

Imagined Player: Designing with Player Expectations in Mind

The Player's influence on the story begins well before development. Like any medium, game development requires creators to target a specific audience —a subset of potential players. This involves selecting from a wide range of player attributes, such as age, attention span, and other demographic or psychographic factors that directly influence how the narrative is crafted and delivered. For example, younger audiences on platforms such as Roblox often require quicker narrative hooks to remain engaged. As Bryant and Giglio observe, "Authors, filmmakers, and dramatists can expect most of their audience to pay attention most of the time. Sadly, with games, it's different" (2015). Developers must balance this by designing stories that capture attention immediately without overburdening players with exposition. During Interview 1, the interviewee remarked, "If you keep them waiting too long for something, they get annoyed. Sometimes, you don't even get to finish the introduction. Before they even reach the action, they already ask, 'What am I doing here? How many more NPCs do I have to listen to?' and they might never return". Interviewee 4 also emphasized a similar need for an instant bond: "There's a relatedness side —we want players to feel a bond. That's why we created a chunky, fatherly king —big belly, big hands, short legs, a huge, friendly grin". To respect the medium's interactive nature, player immersion must be established early because, unlike passive media, video games require players to actively engage with the narrative to progress it. Because of this requirement, the Imagined Player influences the design choices toward a more fast-paced and engaging experience.

Beyond accounting for the target audience's attributes and the medium's interactive nature, the Imagined Player presents another challenge: moral choices. Giving players choices enhances their sense of agency, which is essential in video games. This is particularly true for ethical decisions, which enhance the game's realism and deepen player engagement. However, balancing moral choices within gameplay is far more challenging than balancing other mechanics like weapon types or skill trees. The Imagined Player does not always align with the designer's moral assumptions, as players may interpret situations and choices in unexpected ways. Players approach narrative choices based on their perspectives, influenced by personal contexts and experiences. This variability means that the exact story moment can be interpreted in multiple ways, depending on the player's background and prior interactions within the game. What one player sees as morally 'good' may be interpreted quite differently by another. Therefore, the story must allow multiple angles to handle the fact that

each player's prior understanding will shape how they engage with the story. One critical aspect to consider is ensuring that moral choices are not tied too tightly to gameplay in a way that punishes players for deviating from 'proper' or 'good' moral paths (Heussner *et al.*, 2015). Moral decisions can diminish the player's overall experience if they lead to overly punitive gameplay outcomes. To maintain engagement, the game must provide balanced consequences for all paths, whether good, bad, or neutral. Thus, game design must carefully balance the effects of moral choices, allowing players to experience meaningful gameplay consequences without being locked into negative outcomes that may reduce the game's appeal. Ultimately, the narrative must remain flexible, allowing diverse moral perspectives while avoiding rigid, linear judgments. Ensuring that gameplay mechanics support this flexibility is crucial in creating an immersive experience where the player's choices truly matter without undermining their sense of agency.

Active Player: Shaping the Narrative Through Participation

Video game players can actively participate in the development process using channels like playtesting, early access games, and community feedback. These interactions, which are highly unlikely with other media, provide developers with early insights into player behaviour, preferences, and experiences, thus allowing them to refine both narrative and gameplay.

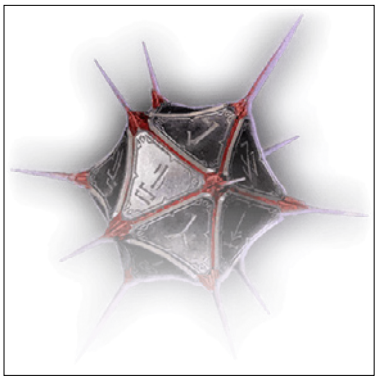
Playtesting also puts narrative elements to the test and shows how they are going to work in different gameplay scenarios and therefore shape the story. Interviewee 1, for instance, gave an example of their play testers being involved even in minor details that might be missed by developers, such as the dresses of one of the main characters. Their playtesters even show their happiness by saying, "This game is clearly made by someone who knows the original work". This led the team to focus more on the original work while working on the adaptation. In a separate play-test context, Interviewee 6 observed: "In our forest scene, we noticed players clicking on everything, so we added an interaction to every object —some play a sound, some run an animation, some trigger a line. Now players spend much longer in that forest".

This early feedback is not limited to playtesting; early-access and beta releases also let players shape a game in progress. When used well, early access can dramatically improve a title. Larian Studios, while developing Baldur's Gate III, released only Act I (less than one-third of the final game) to collect narrative and gameplay feedback. Director Swen Vincke later noted that a single item —Shadowheart's "Mysterious Artifact" (Figure 1)— produced far more narrative permutations than anticipated, prompting the team to adjust it prior to launch (GameSpot, 2022). By iterating that feedback, Larian was able to harmonise story and mechanics, ultimately delivering a critically acclaimed game.

Another way that the Active Player shapes the narrative is by engaging through forums (such as Reddit), developer blogs, and other community platforms. These platforms, especially when facilitated by developers, allow potential players to co-create the narrative experience by giving feedback or insight. This interaction

shapes the developer's understanding of the Imagined Player, thus evolving the game with the player's expectations.

Figure 1. Shadowheart's Mysterious Artifact from Baldur's Gate 3



Source: https://bg3.wiki/wiki/Mysterious_Artefact.

While our analysis merges community feedback, playtesting, and forums into the broader role of the Active Player. We acknowledge that these factors also can be regarded as distinct actors, particularly in AAA or AA studios. However, in indie studios, these participatory channels are often informal and constrained by limited resources. Future studies focusing on larger studios or games may expand the actor network to capture these dynamics more comprehensively.

Perceiving Player: The Player as Narrative Interpreter

Even though this article primarily focuses on how games are made, the Perceiving Player —the person who finally makes sense of the story— remains central. We begin by picturing an Imagined Player to guide every design choice, but real success shows up only when that picture matches the player in front of the screen. To draw them in, designers try to align the player's knowledge with the hero's: wiping the hero's memory like in Zelda: Breath of the Wild, allowing players to revisit key moments like in Horizon Zero Dawn, or starting with a long intro like in Grand Theft Auto VI. The closer that match is, the easier it is to lose yourself in the game. Put simply, the Imagined Player steers the design, the Active Player drives the moment-to-moment action, and the Perceiving Player brings it all together, turning plans and play into a story that resonates.

STORY AND GENRE: HOW GENRE CONSTRAINS AND SHAPES NARRATIVE DESIGN

Genre as a foundational framework is an active actor within the network; it influences and is also influenced by other actors such as mechanics, context, and

players. Unsurprisingly, it is not a passive entity lingering in the background, rather it actively participates in the narrative design process by aligning with the story to shape the final narrative experience. As Skolnick (2014) notes, "A new game almost always starts with a decision on genre, followed by a concept within that genre... before there is a game story, elements such as genre, core mechanics, and context are already established".

This foundational aspect of the genre positions it as a stabilizing force that guides early design decisions and achieves a translation of the interests of the Story within the network. Genre does not diminish the importance of Story, instead, it enriches it by anchoring it more deeply into the game's identity and overall experience.

Genre as Perspective

Perspective is a visual choice and a genre-defining element that significantly shapes how narratives are constructed and experienced. Whether it's a first-person shooter (FPS), third-person shooter (TPS), or isometric role-playing game, the chosen perspective shapes how players engage with both the story and characters.

Figure 2. A screenshot from Half-Life 2, first view of City 17

Source: https://www.dsogaming.com/videotrailer-news/first-half-life-alyx-mod-ports-half-life-2-city-17-to-source-2-engine/.

Immersive simulations (immersive sims) —classified as sub-genres of FPS— are usually associated with player agency and environmental interaction. This association is, of course, no coincidence; the first-person perspective is often the most effective for integrating players into the game world since it is also the most natural perspective due to closeness to human vision. It minimizes the gap between the player and the character, creating a sense that the player is truly inhabiting the character's role. For example, Half-Life II, arguably the most successful example of this genre, immediately establishes its oppressive atmosphere by showing the

massive Citadel tower looking over the city in the iconic entrance scene of City 17 (see Figure 2). This structure serves a dual purpose: it foreshadows the player's final confrontation and embodies the Combine's dominance and control over humanity.

On the other hand, the third-person perspective allows the players to observe the protagonist from a distance, offering a wider view of both their actions and surrounding environment. This perspective is ideal to show the protagonist's personality, abilities, and condition within the context of the game world. Third-person titles reveal character traits and physical interactions through animations, making extensive expositions unnecessary (Heussner *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, it is especially suitable for action-adventure games.

Games like *GTA V*, *Just Cause*, *Uncharted*, and *Tomb Raider* utilize third-person perspective to show off large, intricate worlds and highlight the protagonists' interactions with these environments. This cinematic quality makes third-person games well-suited for action-heavy narratives, and it's no surprise that many of these titles have inspired or been adapted into Hollywood films[1]. The third-person viewpoint's capacity to visually convey character development and world-building through subtle details and expansive vistas helps explain its popularity in mainstream action genres.

Figure 3. An action sequence from 'Tomb Raider'

Source: https://www.syfy.com/syfy-wire/tomb-raider-definitive-edition-holds-up-for-easy-mode-gamers.

1 Notable examples include *Tomb Raider* (adapted into films in 2001, 2003, and 2018), *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2010), *Uncharted* (2022), and *Resident Evil* (numerous adaptations since 2002).

Genre as Expectation

The other function of genre is to set and shape the player's expectations. When players engage with a game, they usually approach with pre-established expectations based on its genre, which eventually influences their anticipation of the narrative as well. As the Interviewee 2 explained, players expected his game to be "more like JRPGs… too story-heavy… there's gotta be a good story". Aligning the narrative depth and style with expectations of the course is essential. If the genre prioritizes gameplay, subtle storytelling that complements the mechanics can be far more effective than excessive exposition. As Heussner advised, "keep the game genre and players' expectations in mind. They don't need extensive story or character development; quick details that highlight or reinforce gameplay or specific mechanics will suffice" (Heussner *et al*., 2015).

Genres like Roguelikes and Soulslikes[2] present unique cases where mechanics and themes are tightly interwoven with the narrative. Death itself becomes a narrative tool in roguelike games characterized by procedurally generated levels and permadeath. Titles like *Dead Cells* and *Hades* use death to advance the story. In *Hades*, for example, each death is not a failure but an integral part of the story's progression. After every death, the protagonist returns to the House of Hades, where new dialogues and character developments unfold, enriching the narrative and expanding the story world. This structure makes "losing feel like a win" (CSGConf, 2021). The cyclical nature of death and rebirth is central to both the character's development and the thematic resonance of the game, reinforcing the idea of perseverance and growth through repeated trials.

Similarly, Soulslike games —known for their high difficulty, and dark, oppressive worlds centred on themes of struggle, loss, and perseverance— challenge players with frequent deaths and the loss of accumulated progress (such as souls), reinforcing these harsh and existential themes. Even a game like Kena: Bridge of Spirits, which has lighter and more family-friendly aesthetics and a more forgiving death penalty, features challenging combat, and explores similar themes of loss, death, and corruption (see Figure 4). The influence of the Soulslike genre shapes the narrative in Kena, turning it towards darker, more mature themes, even with its bright and approachable setting.

2 The term "game-name-likes" refers to game subgenres defined by specific mechanics or design philosophies established by a genre-defining game. Roguelikes are named after the game Rogue (1980), which introduced procedurally generated levels, turn-based gameplay, and permadeath. Similarly, Soulslikes derive from *Dark Souls* (2011), which popularized punishing difficulty, intricate level design, and a narrative conveyed through environmental storytelling.

Figure 4. Dark Souls 1 Remastered (left), Kena: Bridge of Spirits (right), retrieved from the official PlayStation store

Source: Official PlayStation network. Left (Dark Souls Remastered): https://image.api.playstation.com/cdn/EP0700/CUSA08495_00/COYF3JBI46ftkG7tIdTjQg0v9aZ2378N.png?w=440&thumb=false. Right (Kena: Bridge of Spirits): https://image.api.playstation.com/vulcan/ap/rnd/202102/2307/kQzDCY5RCrSXCeeFjPGUzkGI.png?w=440&thumb=false

On the other hand, real-time strategy (RTS) games, with their heavy tactical decision-making and resource and unit management mechanics, usually focus on larger-scale narratives in either historical or fictional timelines. This genre often spans long time intervals, sometimes rooted in real-world events, as in *Age of Empires and Rome: Total War,* or sometimes set in fictional universes, as in *Warcraft*, *Starcraft*, and *Total War: Warhammer*. The strategic nature of the RTS genre tends to narrate civilizations, empires, and warfare where the player commands entire factions or armies, rather than individual character development stories.

Balancing narrative cohesion with player freedom presents a challenge often influenced by genre expectations. Open-world games, for instance, offer vast environments for exploration but may sacrifice a tightly woven narrative in favour of player autonomy. As one developer notes, "Players might prefer gameplay to story and are willing to accept a disjointed narrative for the reward of having total freedom". (Heussner *et al*., 2015). Environmental storytelling and optional quests often compensate in these cases, allowing developers to immerse players without forcing a linear narrative structure.

Moreover, genre acts as a frame that shapes narrative structure, themes, and character development. Different genres necessitate distinct storytelling approaches. For instance, writing for an action RPG often involves focusing on a "larger-than-life, overpowering character", with the narrative centred on the player's journey toward immense power (Heussner *et al*., 2015). In contrast, Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) involve many players sharing the same world, making it impractical for any single player to be portrayed as the sole hero. Therefore, MMOs often apply the traditional three-act structure to side quests and raids rather than to the main storyline (Skolnick, 2014).

STORY AND TECHNOLOGY: THE INFLUENCE OF GAME ENGINES AND TOOLS ON NARRATIVE

Narrative designers often begin with a creative vision, but in practice, that vision is shaped —and sometimes constrained— by technological limitations. Game engines[3], artificial intelligence systems (or algorithms), and many other technological tools that are utilized in the game development process influence stories, their directions and far more frequently their scope. Technology sets the boundaries within which narratives can be constructed, it essentially frames how stories are perceived and told, and often reduces them to what can be implemented within existing constraints.

Technology sets the stage for video game narratives, giving developers the tools and frameworks to tell their stories. But technology isn't just a passive player; it's always changing, often for reasons beyond storytelling. In the early days, when games like Pong were new —technology wasn't built with gaming in mind. Games were more of an experiment back then, borrowing technology from other industries rather than pushing innovation themselves (Kent, 2010). After video games grew into a massive global industry, even surpassing Hollywood in revenue, the role of technology shifted significantly. Platforms like Meta Quest and engines like Unreal Engine, for instance, are specifically designed for video games; they are designed to meet the commercial demands of game developers and players. Gaming emerged as a distinct sector, with technology evolving in tandem to drive its growth.

Developers often face a choice between their story and technical feasibility, facing compromises that can alter the story's original direction. The necessity to optimize for different platforms, manage load times, and ensure smooth gameplay forces designers to adapt their narratives to fit within these technical parameters. These technical limitations might yield creative workarounds. For example, one developer explained that a simple AI pathfinding behaviour, such as zombies relentlessly pursuing the player even at the cost of self-destruction, can unintentionally communicate themes like desperation or hunger (Skolnick, 2014). This is one reason why older games often featured enemies with simplistic behaviours, such as zombies or oversized insects; advanced pathfinding was costly to implement, leading to less complex AI interactions. A similar constraint comes from platform advertising rules (Apple Store). As Interviewee 4 explained, "To be allowed to run that ad, you have to put the scene in the game, so we squeezed a 'save-the-king' mini-level into the build —just so we could say 'look, this screenshot is really from the game'". Similarly, the limitations of game

3 Game engines are software frameworks that provide developers with tools and functionalities to build and render video games. They handle core tasks such as graphics rendering, physics simulation, and input processing. Popular game engines include Unreal Engine, Unity, and Godot.

engines may prevent certain narrative techniques, such as quick cuts to new locations or complex environmental interactions, due to memory and asset-loading constraints (Dille and Platten, 2008). These technological limitations shape not just which stories can be told but also how they unfold, revealing certain aspects of the narrative while concealing others.

Implementing complex narrative features often requires significant technical resources. A seemingly simple narrative idea like "let's make our hero swim" can have a huge impact on the schedule and budget of a game. It requires creating new animations, adjusting physics, and modifying environments —all of which demand significant development time and cost (Bryant and Giglio, 2015). This tension between technical and creative goals can lead to conflicts as programmers and artists debate what is possible and what fits the narrative vision. Interviewee 1 shared how these disagreements arise when one side sees technology as an instrument for achieving goals while the other recognizes its deeper influence on shaping narrative possibilities.

Interviewee 2 discussed how the engine's limitations and the availability of community assets influenced his character and story choices. Using existing assets, he shaped the game's narrative around what was technically possible, demonstrating how technological constraints can inspire creative solutions and determine the story's direction. After that, they also shared how they had to hire someone to customize airship mechanics and user interface elements to better align with the aesthetics and feel of more modern RPGs, like those found in *Final Fantasy VI*. These examples highlight how engine limitations required the developer to balance creative vision with technical constraints.

Historically, technological limitations have profoundly impacted game design and narrative delivery. One developer reflected on how older games were much harder, primarily because saving progress was technically challenging (Game Wisdom, 2021). This limitation led to narratives that required players to master the game in a single run, creating a different kind of tension and storytelling experience compared to modern games with frequent save points and checkpoints. Here, the technical limitation of lacking a save system revealed a distinct narrative experience, one in which tension and consequence were central themes.

In conclusion, technology is not a neutral backdrop for narrative but an active participant in its creation. Game engines, AI, and other tools shape narratives by enabling certain possibilities while constraining others. By recognizing how technology frames narrative possibilities and reveals specific paths, developers can better understand how to craft innovative and technically feasible stories. Through creative engagement with these technological boundaries, developers can explore new ways to tell stories that resonate within and sometimes challenge the technology framework. However, technology is just one Actor within the broader network. Economic forces, such as Money and production plans, also play a pivotal role, actively shaping narratives through the realities of budget and market demands.

Story, Price, and Production Plan: Balancing Narrative Ambition with Budgetary and Production Constraints

Game developers often need to scale back their narratives to fit within budgetary and production constraints. Interviewee 1 shared their experience: "When we encountered the first problem in production, what we did was to reduce the environment and instead build other mechanics". They also explained how they had initially aimed to include all factions in a fantasy adaptation but, due to limited time and budget, had to cut content and merge factions: "We didn't have the time and budget for it, so instead, we cut the strongholds of one faction and put them together even though they are rivals, by adding a common enemy and saying that common enemy destroyed the stronghold".

Economic limitations can compel developers to simplify or linearize narratives originally conceived as branching, multi-path stories, as Heussner *et al*. (2015) noted, "Budget does impact how much actual narrative choice can be offered... without development costs mushrooming". Unlike in film production, where scripts are typically finalized before shooting begins, game narratives often evolve during development. Dille and Platten (2008) stated, "Games... rarely go into production with a script. In fact, we've never heard of it". This iterative process allows for adjustments based on technological capabilities, team input, and resource availability, but also makes narratives more susceptible to changes driven by economic constraints. During the development of Far Cry, for example, the team had to cut significant portions of the story: "We had a story written... we cut half the story when we put it in the game" (Game Wisdom, 2020). Economic pressures can lead to substantial modifications in the narrative. Interviewee 6 provided a contrasting example: a teammate spent considerable time animating a friendly barista for a café scene. Because that character's fully modelled face remained on-screen longer than any other NPC, the team opted to revise the plot to preserve the effort, rather than discard the work. They rewrote the mid-game twist, so the barista became central to a hidden subplot—and, according to the interviewee, "the story finally clicked".

Adapting narratives under constraints is essentially a collaborative effort. Narrative designers work closely with game designers, level designers, artists, and programmers. As Bryant and Giglio (2015) explain, drawing on insights from Steve Gaynor and Haris Orkin, "Video game writing does not happen in a vacuum... It's really a collaboration between all of it because the story is told by every part of the game, as much by the level design and the art as it is by writing". Since teamwork is essential when economic constraints force changes, narrative designers advocate for the story throughout this process, remaining involved at all stages as Heussner explained, "I see the 'narrative designer' as being... an integrated part of the game development team. [They] remain involved as an advocate for the story throughout testing and post-production". (Heussner *et al*., 2015) By staying engaged, they help navigate challenges posed by budget and production limitations, finding creative solutions within practical constraints.

Creative choices do not solely drive narrative design in games but are often shaped by how the game will be perceived and valued in the market.

Developers frequently adapt narratives based on the perceived value they can offer players relative to the game's price. One developer asked, "Are you giving them enough to... if it's a four-dollar game, are you essentially giving them an hour of gameplay?" (Game Wisdom, 2020 November). Narratives are shaped by considerations of perceived value, with longer or more replayable storylines often prioritized to meet player expectations.

Replayability becomes a cost-effective strategy to enhance perceived value without significantly increasing production costs. As Dille shared, "A great game is replayable, and each replay can give the player a different experience". (Dille and Platten, 2008). Developers can offer extended engagement without requiring extensive additional content by designing narratives that encourage multiple playthroughs with different outcomes.

Marketing considerations also play a significant role in shaping game narratives. Interviewee 3 stated, "We generally proceed based on being marketable... we put (story) conflict into it so that it becomes marketable". As an example, they also referenced the kinds of advertisements people encounter daily, "Are you an Angel or a Devil?", "Are you poor or rich?". Narrative elements are often included or adjusted based on their potential appeal to players rather than solely for storytelling purposes. This is particularly true in casual games, where narratives are often created as marketing tools that attract and retain players: "Mostly we use narrative... on the casual side more for marketing purposes". Interviewee 5 described the same logic from an ad-tech perspective: "In mobile ads, the first three seconds are critical; you can even tuck a tiny narrative inside the playable itself".

The critical first impression a game makes on players significantly impacts its success. Interviewee 2 emphasized the importance of the first hour of gameplay, stating that it needs to have a strong hook and high polish to prevent players from quitting or seeking refunds: "The first hour of your game needs to have like a nice hook... because if it doesn't, then something like 90 % of the gamers are going to quit within the first hour and either refund it or just stop playing it". This focus on early engagement often leads developers to allocate resources to ensure the initial narrative experience is compelling, sometimes at the expense of later content.

The narrative does not passively submit to economic forces but actively negotiates its role within the network. It adapts to the realities of production and market demands by employing several strategies, transforming itself to align with these constraints while retaining its integrity. Video game narratives are, thus, not merely the products of artistic inspiration but also the outcome of complex negotiations between creative ambition and economic necessity. Far from being neutral creations, they reflect the production environments in which they are made, constantly adapting to market demands and challenging the integrity of original creative visions.

CONCLUSION

This article aims to demonstrate that video game narrative design is a dynamic, emergent process shaped by a network of diverse actors rather than a fixed,

predetermined script. By applying Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as a guiding framework, we have provided a nuanced understanding of how game narratives are co-created through the continuous interactions between designers, technological tools, market forces, and player feedback. ANT enables us to see beyond traditional, linear views of storytelling, framing narrative design instead as a fluid process that evolves throughout development.

Through a data-driven approach grounded in industry insights, we identified the most important actors within this network and explored how their roles shift and align over time. Designers may envision a narrative direction, but technical constraints, such as the capabilities of game engines or feedback from playtesters, often lead to unexpected adjustments. These actors —Story, Player, Genre, Technology, and Price— play crucial roles, and their complex relationships are key to understanding how narratives emerge.

The relationship between the Story and the Player emphasized the agency of the player and showed how players are actively part of the narrative design process. Whether the Imagined Player guides early design or the Perceiving Player interacts with the final product, player input continuously shapes the story's trajectory. The role of Genre in narrative design has been explained in detail, as a constraint, a convention, an expectation setter, and also as an artistic choice. Whether as a perspective choice or thematic choice, Genre shapes the story greatly. Additionally, Technology—from game engines to AI—sets the stage, enabling or limiting narrative possibilities while also revealing unintended thematic elements through technical constraints. Lastly, the relationship between price, production plan and story revealed how economic forces directly impact narrative scope and how designers should adapt to budgetary limitations. These relationships, in the end, strengthened our argument that video game narratives are not static products of a singular creative vision but are instead continuously refined by dynamic interactions of both human and non-human actors.

In reframing video game narratives as collaborative constructs, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse by offering a more holistic view of narrative design in video games. Detecting and understanding the most influential actors in this process is crucial for scholars and practitioners. It enables a deeper appreciation of how stories come to life in games and how the balance between narrative, gameplay, technology, and economic constraints can shape player experiences.

Our analysis is localized to small indie studios and is analytically transferable to similar contexts. AAA and AA environments are likely to introduce more formalized actors (e.g., publishers, platform QA, localization) and redistribute agency. A comparative replication could reveal which relations persist and which new ones become decisive. By adopting this approach, we open the door to future research investigating the complex relationships between actors involved in game development. For practitioners, it highlights the importance of considering all actors —whether human or technological— throughout the design process, providing valuable insights for crafting cohesive and engaging narrative experiences. Future work could delve deeper into the Translation Process of Actor-Network Theory, exploring how different actors negotiate their

roles and influence outcomes over time. Additionally, researchers could explore how emerging technologies reshape these relationships, further enhancing our understanding of narrative design dynamics.

Şafak Topçu. PhD candidate in Design, Technology and Society, focusing on Narrative Structures and Video Games, received his bachelor's and master's degrees in computer engineering from Istanbul Technical University. He has worked in several small indie game studios, gaining hands-on experience in game development. In addition to industry work, he held research assistant positions at MEF University and the Turkish German University. He is currently pursuing his PhD at Özyeğin University, where he conducts research on narrative in video games under the supervision of Metin Çavuş.

Metin Çavuş. Assistant professor, chair, Department of Communication Design, Documentary Cinema, Narrative Structures, studied engineering at İstanbul Technical University (bachelor), and art and design at Yıldız Technical University (master and PhD). He has been a faculty member at Özyeğin University, Faculty of Architecture and Design, Department of Communication Design since 2014, teaching cinema and photography. Çavuş is a documentary filmmaker. His documentary film *Kutluğ Ataman* (2011) was screened at international film festivals and prestigious art galleries and was released as a DVD. His photo book on İstanbul city walls, Sublime and Secluded, was published in 2019. Çavuş has been collaborating with international contemporary artists as a member of their creative teams. These artworks were exhibited at several prominent art institutions and exhibitions such as Tate Britain, SFMOMA and Venice Architecture Biennial. His areas of specialty are theory, history, and social aspect of cinema (both fiction and documentary) and photography; narrative structures of time-based media such as film and video games.

References

Aarseth, Espen (1997). *Cybertext: Perspectives on ergodic literature*. Johns Hopkins University Press. https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.5555/265941

Aristotle (1920). *Poetics*. Clarendon Press.

Bryant, Robert Denton and Giglio, Keith (2015). *Slay the dragon: Writing great video games*. Michael Wiese Productions.

Corbin, Juliet and Strauss, Anselm (2014). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. Sage Publications.

Crick, Timothy (2011). The game body: Toward a phenomenology of contemporary video gaming. *Games and Culture*, *6*(3), 259-269. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412010364980

CSGConf (27 April 2021). CSGC 2021: Integrating mechanics and narratives [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXmxL8PiVK8

Cypher, Mark and Richardson, Ingrid (2006). An actor-network approach to games and virtual environments. In *Joint International Conference on CyberGames and Interactive Entertainment 2006* (CGIE2006).

DeWinter, Jennifer and Kocurek, Carly A. (2017). "Aw fuck, I got a bitch on my team!": Women and the exclusionary cultures of the computer game complex. In Kishonna L. Gray, Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen (Eds.), *Gaming representation: Race, gender, and sexuality in video games* (pp. 57-73). Indiana University Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2005rgq?turn_away=true

Dille, Flint and Platten, John Zuur (2008). *The ultimate guide to video game writing and design*. Lone Eagle Publishing.

Freeman, Guo; McNeese, Nicholas; Bardzell, Jeffrey, and Bardzell, Shaowen (2020). "Pro-Amateur"-driven technological innovation: Participation and challenges in indie game development. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(GROUP), 1-22. https://doi.org/10.1145/3375184

Game Wisdom (26 June 2020). Making your narrative and game mechanics work together | GameDev Roundtable [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s524frHFw10

Game Wisdom (30 November 2020). Adding value to your game design | GameDev Roundtable Cast [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZykzZ_ksFE

Game Wisdom (27 August 2021). Debating difficulty in game design | Game Dev Roundtable [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGrDnnoLK4Q

Game Spot (3 June 2022). The box that broke *Baldur's Gate 3* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHW_KF-P7i8I

Heussner, Tobias; Finley, Toiya Kristen; Hepler, Jennifer Brandes; and Lemay, Ann (2015). *The Game Narrative Toolbox*, Focal Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315766836

Hocking, Clint (7 October 2007). Ludonarrative dissonance in *BioShock*. Click Nothing. http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html

Hung, Aaron Chia Yuan (2016). Beyond the player: A user-centered approach to analyzing digital games and players using actor-network theory. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, *13*(5-6), 227-243.

Jenkins, Henry (2004). Game design as narrative architecture. In Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Eds.), *First person: New media as story, performance, and game* (pp. 118-130). MIT Press.

Jessen, Jari Due and Jessen, Carsten (2014). Games as actors-interaction, play, design, and actor network theory. *International Journal on Advances in Intelligent Systems*, *7*(3-4), 412-422.

Juul, Jesper (2019). *Handmade pixels: Independent video games and the quest for authenticity*. MIT Press.

Kent, Steven L. (2010). *The ultimate history of video games. From pong to Pokémon and beyond: The story behind the craze that touched our lives and changed the world*. Crown Publishing Group.

Latour, Bruno (2007). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network theory*. Oxford University Press.

Latour, Bruno (2017). On actor-network theory: A few clarifications, plus more than a few complications. *Philosophical Literary Journal Logos*, *27*(1), 173-197. https://doi.org/10.22394/0869-5377-2017-1-173-197

McRae, Evan (2017). *Narrative design for Indies: Getting started*. Fiction Engine.

Parker, Felan (2013). Indie game studies year eleven. In *DiGRA '13 – Proceedings of the 2013 International Conference on the Digital Games Research Association*. http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/indie-game-studies-year-eleven/

Ruffino, Paolo (2020). *Independent videogames: Cultures, networks, techniques and politics*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367336219

Ryan, Marie-Laure (2006). Computer games as narrative: The ludology versus narrativism controversy. *Dichtung Digital. Journal für Kunst und Kultur digitaler Medien*, 36, chapter 8, 1, 1-1/276-297. *medienebene*. https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17696

Skolnick, Evan (2014). *Video game storytelling: What every developer needs to know about narrative techniques*. Watson-Guptill.

Tripodos, number 59 | 2026 | 51-75
ISSN: 1138-3305

Received: 05-06-25
Accepted: 06-10-25
OnlineFirst: 10-02-26
Final publication: 01-06-26

Creativity at Play: Content-Creators and Micro-Entrepreneurship in 'Animal Crossing: New Horizons'

Cátia Ferreira
CECC - Catholic University of Portugal (Portugal)
Carla Ganito
CECC - Catholic University of Portugal (Portugal)
Soraia Gonçalves
Human Sciences School, Catholic University of Portugal (Portugal)

Digital games have evolved significantly since their emergence in the 1970s, offering users not only entertainment but also opportunities for creativity, entrepreneurship, and community building. This study explores these dynamics through a case study of Animal Crossing: New Horizons (ACNH) (Nintendo EPD, 2020), focusing specifically on a selected group of prominent content creators active on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitch, and TikTok. These individuals engage in practices that extend beyond gameplay, including streaming, digital design services, and fan-made merchandise. Drawing on a theoretical framework centred on participatory culture, platformization, and fan labour, the article investigates how ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) supports hybrid models of creativity and monetization within platform economies. Based on qualitative methods —namely document analysis and semi-structured interviews— the study examines how in-game tools and

Los juegos digitales han evolucionado significativamente desde su surgimiento en la década de 1970, ofreciendo a los usuarios no solo entretenimiento, sino también oportunidades para la creatividad, el emprendimiento y la construcción de comunidades. Este estudio explora estas dinámicas a través de un estudio de caso de Animal Crossing: New Horizons (ACNH) (Nintendo EPD, 2020), centrándose específicamente en un grupo seleccionado de creadores de contenido destacados, activos en plataformas como YouTube, Instagram, Twitch y TikTok. Estos individuos desarrollan prácticas que van más allá de la jugabilidad, como el streaming, los servicios de diseño digital y la creación de productos derivados elaborados por fans. A partir de un marco teórico centrado en la cultura participativa, la plataformización y el trabajo de los fans, el artículo investiga cómo ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) sostiene modelos híbridos de creatividad y monetización dentro de

Doi.org/10.51698/tripodos.2026.59.03

community infrastructures facilitate expressive and entrepreneurial forms of engagement for this specific profile of players. While not representative of the broader player base, the findings offer insights into how digital games can function as ecosystems where creative labour intersects with micro-entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, participatory culture, user-generated content, creative labour, micro-entrepreneurship.*

las economías de plataformas. Basado en métodos cualitativos —en concreto, análisis documental y entrevistas semiestructuradas—, el estudio examina cómo las herramientas del juego y las infraestructuras comunitarias facilitan formas expresivas y emprendedoras de participación para este perfil específico de jugadores. Si bien no es representativo del conjunto de la base de jugadores, los resultados ofrecen una visión de cómo los juegos digitales pueden funcionar como ecosistemas donde el trabajo creativo se entrecruza con la microempresa.

Palabras clave: Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, cultura participativa, contenido generado por usuarios, trabajo creativo, microemprendimiento.*

Digital games have evolved into complex cultural forms that extend far beyond entertainment. Since their emergence in the 1970s, games have developed into immersive environments that blend social interaction, narrative, artistic expression, and increasingly, economic activity. While gaming remains closely associated with leisure, it now also serves as a platform for creativity, entrepreneurship, and community building (Pearce, 2009; Jenkins, 2006b; Consalvo and Begy, 2016; Woodcock and Johnson, 2019).

Central to this transformation is the rise of active fan and play communities, where players engage in customization, modding, and user-generated content production (Postigo, 2007; Banks, 2013; Lamerichs, 2018). These participatory practices blur the boundaries between creators and consumers, enabling players to exercise creative agency. Digital platforms and social media further amplify these dynamics, allowing for co-authorship, community-driven innovation, and monetization through streaming, commissions, and fan-made merchandise (Postigo, 2014; Johnson and Woodcock, 2018; Taylor, 2018).

This article presents an exploratory study of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH) (Nintendo EPD, 2020), focusing on how a specific profile of players —prominent content creators active on social media platforms— engage in creative and entrepreneurial practices within the game and its surrounding ecosystems. The research does not aim to generalize findings to the broader ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) player base; rather, it seeks to understand the

experiences and strategies of a visible subset of creators whose activities exemplify the intersections of participatory culture, platformization, and fan labour.

Using qualitative methods, including document analysis and semi-structured interviews, the study investigates how in-game tools and community infrastructures support expressive and monetizable forms of engagement. By examining the motivations, practices, and challenges faced by these creators, the research contributes to ongoing discussions about digital co-creation, micro-entrepreneurship, and the evolving nature of creative labour in platform-based gaming cultures.

The article is divided into three main sections. Co-creation, creativity, and participatory culture are covered in the first section of the article, followed by hybrid models of entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity in the second, and the presentation and analysis of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) as a case study in the third.

PARTICIPATORY CULTURE, CREATIVITY, AND CO-CREATION

The idea of participatory culture has been essential to comprehending how media consumers interact with content and with one another since the early 2000s. Low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for making and sharing creations, and a sense of social connection and shared purpose are characteristics of participatory culture, according to Jenkins (2006a, 2006b). This is seen in the rise of active communities around digital games that actively influence the experience, meaning, and even game design, going beyond simple consumption.

Co-creation and creativity exercises can be encouraged by digital games. The close relationship between play and creative thinking has been researched extensively over the years Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1976) propose that fosters creative problem-solving and the ability to think outside conventional boundaries. Similarly, Lieberman (1977) and Sternberg (1988) suggest that play activities encourage imaginative thinking and the exploration of make-believe realities. Howard-Jones *et al*. (2002) and Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) further investigated the cognitive benefits of play, highlighting its role in enhancing creative thinking and innovation. Russ *et al*. (1999) provided empirical evidence that play activities contribute to the development of creative skills and confidence in the creative process. On the other hand, Blanco-Herrera *et al*. (2019), Jackson (2012) and Bowman *et al*. (2015) demonstrate that games provide environments where players can experiment with different strategies and solutions, fostering creativity; while Jackson *et al*. (2012) and Hall *et al*. (2019, 2020) evince that playing digital games inspires players to take part in creative endeavours like modding and customization. According to Moffat *et al*. (2017) and Ott and Pozzi (2012), games can even help players develop their creative confidence by letting them experiment with novel ideas. Sundar and Hutton (2010) also emphasized the social aspects of creativity in digital games by highlighting how players collaborate and share their creations within gaming communities. Collectively,

these studies demonstrate that in addition to being entertaining, digital games foster creativity, community building, and co-authorship.

The idea of co-creation captures how players and developers negotiate authorship in these settings. According to Banks and Humphreys (2008), co-creation is a process in which players imaginative input becomes a part of the game's continuous life cycle, expanding its cultural presence beyond the developer's initial intentions, whether via customization, level design, or modding. Similarly, Postigo (2007) highlights how players can influence the game and its community through user-generated content, which frequently blurs the line between official and unofficial production. He builds on this discussion by exploring the ways in which fan labour functions in commercial ecosystems, emphasizing conflicts between corporate control and artistic freedom (2014).

Co-creation also occurs through group practices that influence the larger game ecosystem, in addition to individual acts of customization or creation. Lamerichs (2018) emphasizes how fan communities extend and reinterpret game narratives through textual performances like cosplay, fan fiction, and machinima, frequently questioning conventional interpretations and creating room for different voices and identities. This collaborative aspect emphasizes how authorship in games is a continuous negotiation between developers, players, and communities rather than a set or hierarchical process. Furthermore, conflicts between control and empowerment shape the negotiated realm of digital authorship. As Pearce (2009) shows in her study of emergent player communities, co-creative practices often arise in grassroots, playful settings but can come into conflict with corporate governance and intellectual property regimes. This highlights the ambivalent nature of co-creation, which oscillates between enabling participatory expression and reinforcing platform control over user practices. Taylor's (2006, 2018) work further underscores how performative and aesthetic aspects of play constitute public forms of creative authorship, particularly in live streaming, sports, and social media. These practices transform gameplay into spectator experiences and cultural performances, expanding the reach and significance of player creativity beyond the game itself.

Importantly, the social dimensions of participatory culture are equally central. According to Pearce (2009), emergent communities in games serve as venues for group play, experimentation, and identity development, once players share information, provide criticism, and collaborate on creative projects, influencing customs and procedures in the process. Taylor's (2006, 2018) work on the performative aspects of gaming further points to the ways that play becomes a site of public display and meaning-making, particularly in live streaming, social media sharing, and fan art. Lastowka (2010) points out that the aesthetic and legal dimensions of digital authorship further complicate the boundary between player and producer, as players' creations take on artistic and sometimes contested status.

While participatory practices have often been framed in terms of creativity and community, they also carry economic and entrepreneurial implications. As scholars like Postigo (2014) and Banks (2013) note, co-creation frequently intersects with the logics of platform economies, where visibility, reputation,

and sometimes monetary reward become entangled with creative expression. Although these dynamics will be explored more fully in the next section, it is important to recognize here that participatory culture is not a purely leisure-based or altruistic domain; instead, it increasingly functions within systems of value generation that reward not just play, but productive, innovative, and entrepreneurial forms of engagement.

Altogether, these practices construct a negotiated space of digital authorship, where players' creative agency coexists and interacts with developer intentions and platform constraints. Participatory culture in games enables players to become creative agents, co-authors, and community members, transforming the game into a dynamic site of cultural production. This transformation is made possible by the technical affordances of the game, the social infrastructures of its player base, and the broader media ecosystems in which play unfolds. Understanding these dimensions sets the stage for exploring how creativity in games moves beyond play into micro-entrepreneurial and economic activity, a shift that reflects wider changes in platform-based game cultures.

While participatory culture has often been celebrated for its creative and communal possibilities, it is increasingly shaped by the platform infrastructures that enable, channel, and monetize these practices. As players move between roles of co-creator, performer, and community member, their activities become deeply entangled with platform economies that capitalize on user-generated content, data flows, and affective labour. This transformation sets the stage for understanding how play becomes a site not only of creativity and social connection, but also of labour, commodification, and micro-entrepreneurial opportunity, dynamics explored in the following section on platformization, playbour, and micro-entrepreneurship.

PLATFORMIZATION, *PLAYBOUR*, AND MICRO-ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The social, cultural, and economic dynamics of gaming have been significantly altered by the conversion of digital games into platforms. Games are now platformized ecosystems that encourage ongoing engagement, user-generated content, and complex social networks rather than being isolated products (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Woodcock and Johnson, 2019). Platformization is the term used to describe the infrastructure change where digital technologies mediate social interaction, data extraction, value generation, and cultural distribution across various scales and sectors (Dijck *et al*., 2018). Through this process, games have become key locations for user participation and have been incorporated into platform economies that are characterized by algorithmic governance, scalability, and modularity.

Players have emerged as important contributors to platform economies in this context, making it harder to distinguish between work, leisure, and entrepreneurship. By explaining how fruitful, frequently unpaid player activities create value for game companies and platforms, the concept of playbour (play

+ labour) encapsulates this fusion (Kücklich, 2005; Scholz, 2013). The cultural and commercial life cycle of games is enhanced by various practices, such as beta testing, community moderation, modding, live streaming, speedrunning, and content creation (Dyer-Witheford and Peuter, 2009; Sotamaa, 2010; Johnson, 2018). Crucially, these actions are not merely optional or lighthearted; rather, they are intricately linked to the platform logics of audience acquisition, monetization, and datafication (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Woodcock and Johnson, 2019). Fun labour (Terranova, 2000; Bulut, 2015) is a related concept that highlights the emotional and enjoyable aspects of digital labour. Unlike traditional forms of work, fun labour thrives on passion, enjoyment, and community recognition, yet it remains productive within capitalist economies, generating surplus value for platforms and game studios. Central to this is affective labour (Hardt, 1999; Jarrett, 2016), which underpins how player enthusiasm and care become key sources of value. As Bulut (2015) argues, fun labour in gaming involves the extraction of affect, where the enthusiasm and creativity of players become raw material for commercial gain. This highlights the power and profit disparities ingrained in what appear to be voluntary activities, complicating the frequently cheerful discourse of participatory culture.

Indeed, these practices are not without cost. The rise of micro-entrepreneurship in gaming —through monetization strategies like fan merchandise, commissions, and streaming revenue— has introduced new forms of precarity and self-exploitation. As de Peuter (2011) argues, the creative economy often masks exploitative conditions under the guise of autonomy and passion. Many creators operate in environments marked by instability, algorithmic pressure, and emotional exhaustion, where the promise of visibility and income is unevenly distributed.

Srnicek (2017) further critiques platform capitalism as a system that extracts value from user activity while externalizing risk and responsibility. In the case of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators, this manifests in the expectation to produce regular, engaging content across multiple platforms, often without guaranteed compensation or long-term sustainability. Interviewees like Lex Play and Crossing Channel described content creation as their primary occupation, yet also acknowledged the emotional toll and performance pressure involved in maintaining visibility and relevance.

Laszkiewicz and Kalinska-Kula (2023) highlight how digital creators —especially in influencer and gaming cultures— navigate blurred boundaries between personal identity and professional output. Their work underscores the commodification of authenticity and intimacy, where creators must continuously manage audience expectations, brand partnerships, and algorithmic trends. This dynamic was evident in the interviews, where creators spoke of burnout, content fatigue, and the need to "stay ahead" of platform changes to remain viable.

The growth of micro-entrepreneurship, where participants use their knowledge, creative outputs, and visibility to access financial opportunities, is a significant effect of platformization. This covers activities like making fan merchandise, selling in-game items or mods, providing coaching or customization services, or making money off of gameplay on Twitch, YouTube,

or Patreon (Taylor, 2018; Postigo, 2014; Johnson, 2018). Remarkably, these entrepreneurial endeavours frequently originate from amateur or grassroots communities rather than official job paths, mirroring a wider trend toward what Senft (2008) initially referred to as microcelebrity and what Abidin and Brown (2018) have proposed as microcelebrity cultures across digital media. These practices are not confined to entertainment; they embody forms of self-branding, affective labour, and algorithmic visibility, where success depends on managing authenticity, audience engagement, and platform metrics (Abidin, 2016; Khamis *et al*., 2017).

At the same time, these developments raise critical concerns around precarity, exploitation, and inequality. While some players successfully transform passion into profit, many others encounter the structural asymmetries of platform economies, where a small minority of creators capture disproportionate rewards, and labour conditions are governed by opaque algorithms and shifting platform policies (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019; Johnson, 2018). Moreover, the expectation that players continuously contribute creative labour can normalize work intensification and blur the boundaries between play, work, and identity (Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2005; Scholz, 2013).

Crucially, the entrepreneurial opportunities afforded by platformized games are shaped not only by technical affordances but also by social infrastructures. Nieborg and Poell (2018) emphasize how platform logics encourage modularity and scalability, making it possible for niche practices to become marketable products or services. Yet the social infrastructures of gaming, which includes community norms, governance practices, informal economies, and affective attachments, play a decisive role in shaping the kinds of entrepreneurial engagements that emerge (Pearce, 2009; Taylor, 2006; Abidin, 2016). As Jenkins (2013) and Postigo (2014) argue, fan-driven activities are frequently motivated by affective investments and social commitments, yet they also intersect with commercial interests, contributing to the production of cultural and economic value. In addition to the conflicts between autonomy and capture that define modern game cultures, this calls into question the commodification of intimacy, authenticity, and community (Taylor, 2018; Abidin and Brown, 2018).

When combined, the platformization of games, the rise of playbour and fun labour, and the development of micro-entrepreneurship indicate a shift in the cultural economy of digital games, where labour, affect, creativity, and commerce are becoming more and more entwined, presenting both chances for exploitation and chances for empowerment. Since ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) offers a particularly rich case for examining these dynamics —combining practices of creativity, sociality, and entrepreneurship in a highly platformized environment— the following section uses it as a case study to help better understand this shift.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons as a Case Study

Research on digital games as cultural phenomena has increasingly focused on understanding how players use these platforms for economic activity, social interaction, and creativity. Taking this into account, this section is centred on

the presentation of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) as a case study, focusing how players make use of the community infrastructures, market-like economies, and creative affordances integrated into the game and surrounding online ecosystems. Popularity, adaptable gameplay, and its emergence as a cultural touchstone during a period of heightened social and economic precarity, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, led to the selection of this research object.

The section is structured in four sections. The first introduces the game and its key components, focusing on the features that make it especially relevant for researching creativity and community dynamics. The methods for data collection and analysis, as well as the methodological approach of the empirical research, are contextualized in the second. In the third, results are described and analysed; and in the fourth, and last section findings are discussed in the scope of the theoretical framework, taking into account the broader implications for understanding the intersections of play, creativity, and platform-mediated economies.

'Animal Crossing': 'New Horizons'

The latest game in Nintendo's *Animal Crossing* series, which was first released in 2001 under the creative direction of Katsuya Eguchi and Hisashi Nogami, is ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020), which was released in 2020. Players can take on the role of a human newcomer living among anthropomorphic animal villagers in this social simulation series. As a result, the game places more emphasis on daily life than on competition or combat, players are invited to gather resources, fish and garden, make friends with non-player characters (NPCs), and customize their living space. One of the series' distinguishing features is its real-time clock system, which creates a strong sense of immersion and seasonality by synchronizing in-game time with the player's first-life time and calendar.

New Horizons (Nintendo EPD, 2020) adds several new features while expanding on these fundamental mechanics. Interestingly, players now find themselves on a remote island and are entrusted with turning it into a flourishing, personalized community. The crafting system allows for the creation of furniture and tools, while online functionalities enable players to visit each other's islands and share their designs and achievements, and multiplayer play has become a central feature, reflecting Nintendo's increasing focus on social interactivity (MacDonald, 2020).

ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) achieved remarkable commercial success, becoming the second best-selling game on the Nintendo Switch platform (Reynolds, 2024). Its popularity was amplified by the global COVID-19 pandemic, during which it offered a comforting and socially connected experience to players under lockdown (MacDonald, 2020). The combination of routine and freedom in the game is part of its appeal; players create personal objectives and participate in seasonal events, which fosters a sustained engagement with the game world, even though there is no set plot or win condition.

Tom Nook, the enterprising tanuki (Japanese raccoon dog) who manages the player's home loans and island development, is one of the game's most

recognizable NPCs. Nook, who represents themes of debt and capitalism, has grown to be both a beloved and divisive figure within the fan community. Another key figure is Blathers, the museum curator owl, who encourages players to collect and donate fossils, fish, insects, and artworks, tapping into the game's strong focus on collection and curation (Albiges, 2021). These characters add to the game's cyclical rhythms by gradually giving players new tasks and inspiration.

The *Animal Crossing* games, and *New Horizons* (Nintendo EPD, 2020) in particular, promote a thriving culture of player creativity and user-generated content. Players can create intricate scenes that allude to popular culture, artwork, or personal narratives, as well as clothing, interiors, and landscapes, using the in-game customization tools. This ethos of creativity is amplified by online sharing, as players exchange designs, dream codes, and island tours across social media platforms and streaming services. The intersection of gameplay, creativity, and community participation makes ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) a rich site for exploring player agency, identity expression, and digital sociability, themes that will be examined through the empirical research presented in the following sections.

Methods

To assess the creative practices, motivations, and community engagements of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) players, this exploratory study draws on qualitative methods combining semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The research focuses on eight prominent content producers active across platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitch, and TikTok: Ceomg, Dagnel, Graefromtrippyland, Crossing Channel, Tofupals, Lex Play, Miss_pootsie_crossing, and Dr. Dodo. In this study, a "prominent content producer" is defined as a creator whose output in the ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) ecosystem fulfils at least two of the following: (a) a minimum threshold of subscriber or follower count on a primary platform; (b) sustained publishing activity over time; (c) recognition by the ACNH community (e.g., Reddit mentions, cross-platform citations); and (d) cross-platform presence (i.e., active on more than one streaming or social media outlet). The selection followed purposive sampling criteria aimed at capturing the diversity of creative practices within the ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) ecosystem. The final sample balanced creators differing in content format (video essays, tutorials, aesthetic showcases), audience scale (micro- to mid-tier creators), and platform emphasis (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Twitch). The inclusion of these eight creators was guided by their sustained activity, visibility across fan networks, and representativeness of the main creative subcultures observed during preliminary mapping.

To provide a clearer overview of the empirical data collected, the following table summarizes key characteristics of the eight ACNH content creators interviewed for this study. The table outlines the platforms they use, the stylistic focus of their content, their monetization strategies, and the nature of their community engagement. This comparative snapshot highlights the diversity

of creative and entrepreneurial practices among prominent ACNH creators and supports the thematic analysis presented in the subsequent sections.

Table 1. Summary of interviewed ACNH content creators

Creator	Platform(s) Used	Content Style	Monetization Strategies	Community Engagement
Ceomg	YouTube, Instagram	Cozy aesthetics; viewer-submitted island tours	YouTube monetization; brand collaborations	Soft commentary; community curation
Dagnel	YouTube	Tutorials; optimization guides	Ad revenue; affiliate links; memberships	Expert–novice dynamic; algorithm-aware scheduling
Graefromtrippyland	Instagram	Anti-aesthetic builds; chaotic terraforming	Limited monetization	Disruptive design; visual experimentation
Crossing Channel	YouTube	News updates; speculation; fan polls	Ad revenue; memberships	Community voice amplification; timely updates
Tofupals	Instagram, TikTok	Pastel-toned reels; cozycore themes	Brand collaborations; design commissions	Emotional support; calm space creation
Lex Play	YouTube	Narrative builds; spatial storytelling	YouTube monetization; community commissions	Story-driven engagement; long-form content
Miss_pootsie_crossing	Instagram	Lifestyle decor; seasonal outfits	Sponsorships; affiliate partnerships	Aspirational content; influencer branding
Dr. Dodo	TikTok	Villager home makeovers; whimsical renovations	TikTok monetization; commissions	Character storytelling; lighthearted commentary

Source: Own elaboration.

The eight online interviews were conducted via Zoom, in September 2021, with ACNH content creators, selected for their visibility and influence within the community across platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Twitch. The participants were Ceomg, Dagnel, Graefromtrippyland, Crossing Channel, Tofupals, Lex Play, Miss_pootsie_crossing, and Dr. Dodo. The interviews' script explored five thematic blocks: motivations for becoming content creators; content production practices (including platforms used, types of content, and time commitment); the economic and artistic dimensions of their work; relationships with the *Animal Crossing* fandom; and perceptions of the game's relevance and their future as creators. Sample questions included: What motivated you to become a content creator? What platforms do you use to share content? Do you earn economic benefits from your work?, and What are your plans as a creator?

Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and one hour, was recorded with the participants' permission, and was then verbatim transcribed and subjected to a thematic analysis.

In April 2025, a document analysis was conducted to complement the interviews. This involved a systematic examination of the creators' output across YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, X [previously Twitter], and Twitch, including approximately forty videos and twenty-five social media posts, as well as channel descriptions and livestream chat interactions. Table 2 presents an overview of selected ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators.

Table 2. Overview of selected ACNH content creators

Creator	Key Features / Content Style	Thematic Focus	Creative Practices	Audience Engagement	Platform Example
Ceomg	Dream tours, calm commentary, cozy aesthetics	Cottagecore, kidcore	Curating community islands, showcasing trends	Interactive, invites participation	YouTube: "Dream Address Tour - Cozy Cottagecore Island"; viewer-submitted island tours
Dagnel	Tutorials, optimization, glitches, speed strategies	Efficiency, mastery, progression	Systems mastery, mechanical experimentation	Expert–novice teaching	YouTube: "How to Get Infinite Bells in ACNH"; tutorial videos on villager hunting and resource optimization
Graefromtrippyland	Surreal, psychedelic, chaotic island designs	Surrealism, maximalism, anti-aesthetic	Experimental design, norm-breaking	Appeals to alternative/ countercultural players	Instagram/ Tumblr: surreal island builds and "trippy" villager photos
Crossing Channel	News updates, speculation, humour, commentary	Timeliness, community excitement, fandom events	News mediation, community amplification	Parasocial, friendly authority	YouTube: "ACNH June Update Predictions"; fan polls and event summaries
Tofupals	Calming, pastel visuals, soft aesthetic posts/videos	Cozycore, comfort, gentle escapism	Mood curation, emotional atmosphere	Creates gentle, nonjudgmental space	Instagram: soft pastel island tours; TikTok ASMR-style clips

Creator	Key Features / Content Style	Thematic Focus	Creative Practices	Audience Engagement	Platform Example
Lex Play	Narrative builds, emotional stories, character focus	Memory, nostalgia, community, storytelling	Spatial storytelling, anthropomorphizing villagers	Invites emotional engagement	YouTube: "Building a Storybook Forest for Fauna"; long-form videos blending gameplay and narration
Miss_pootsie_ crossing	High-polish, aesthetic perfection, Instagram reels	Beauty, design perfection, fashion, decor	Visual curation, meticulous staging	Aspirational, offers visual inspiration	Instagram reels on seasonal decor; coordinated outfit posts
Dr. Dodo	Memes, humour, satire, fandom critique	Humour, absurdity, player frustrations	Meme creation, rapid response to fandom trends	Highly participatory, in-jokes	Twitter/ Instagram/ TikTok memes about villager drama

Source: Own elaboration.

The analysis focused on observable patterns in tone, visual aesthetics, narrative structure, thematic focus, and audience engagement strategies, reflecting each creator's distinctive style —for instance, cozy and calming content (Ceomg, Tofupals), optimization and tutorial videos (Dagnel), surreal and experimental builds (Graefromtrippyland), narrative-driven storytelling (Lex Play), high-polish aesthetic showcases (Miss_pootsie_crossing), news and community updates (Crossing Channel), and humour— and meme-based content (Dr. Dodo). By comparing these outputs with creators' self-reported practices, the document analysis enabled triangulation and provided insight into how ACNH content is produced, consumed, and circulated across different subcultures within the fan community.

Data Analysis

In accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase methodology, thematic analysis was used to examine the empirical data, which included semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Codes were initially generated inductively from the transcripts and documents, capturing recurrent patterns in creative intent, self-presentation, and platform use. Through iterative comparison and clustering, these codes were grouped into three overarching themes: aesthetic and emotional curation, systems mastery and optimization, and experimental and narrative play; which represented the most salient intersections between creativity, labour, and platform engagement. This approach made it possible to identify recurring trends in the way ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content producers interact with the game, audience, and platform infrastructures.

The empirical data included both interview transcripts and creator-produced content. The following table (Table 3) presents a summary of observed patterns in content style, thematic focus, creative practices, and audience engagement, drawn from the document analysis. These observations provide a visual overview of how each creator's outputs reflect distinct approaches to creativity, community interaction, and cultural positioning, and serve as a bridge to the thematic analysis that follows.

Table 3. Document analysis insights of ACNH content creators

Creator	Platform / Content Style	Document Analysis Insights
Ceomg	YouTube – Dream tours, cozy aesthetics	Consistent pastel/natural visuals; soft, calming narration; emphasizes community participation; reinforces cozy, inviting mood
Dagnel	YouTube – Tutorials, optimization, glitches	Step-by-step guides; analytical tone; clear visual demonstrations; emphasizes efficiency and mastery; engages viewers in learning
Graefromtrippyland	Instagram/Tumblr – Surreal, psychedelic island builds	Bold, clashing colours; chaotic layouts; experimental and norm-breaking; appeals to countercultural audiences
Crossing Channel	YouTube – News, commentary, humour	Rapid-response content; authoritative yet friendly tone; blends humour with updates; engages community via polls and speculation
Tofupals	Instagram/TikTok – Calming, pastel posts/ videos	Soft, immersive visuals; mood curation; gentle, non-judgmental interaction; emphasizes comfort and escapism
Lex Play	YouTube – Narrative builds, emotional stories	Story-driven content with strong narrative arcs; anthropomorphizes villagers; nostalgic, emotional engagement; invites audience reflection
Miss_pootsie_ crossing	Instagram – High-polish, aesthetic reels	Meticulously staged visuals; aspirational aesthetic; blends game design with fashion/lifestyle cues; visually inspirational for audience
Dr. Dodo	Twitter/Instagram/ TikTok – Memes, humour, satire	Fast-paced humour; reactive to trends; engages community in in-jokes; satirical commentary on game mechanics and fandom culture

Source: Own elaboration.

Each theme reflects a distinct mode of creative labour, revealing how players transform leisure into entrepreneurial activity within platformized environments. While these themes emerged specifically from the practices of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators, they are not exclusive to this community. In fact, they may be transposable to other game cultures, particularly those that support customization, content creation, and social sharing.

For example, narrative play and spatial storytelling are widely observed in sandbox games like Minecraft or The Sims, where players construct immersive worlds and share them through streaming or fan fiction. This aligns with Pearce's (2009) concept of "communities of play", which emphasizes emergent storytelling and collaborative meaning-making in virtual worlds, and with Jenkins' (2006b) work on participatory culture and fan-authored narratives.

Lamerichs (2018) further illustrates how fans extend game narratives through intermedial practices such as cosplay and machinima.

Systems mastery is a common theme in competitive or strategy-based games such as *Pokémon*, *League of Legends*, or *Stardew Valley*, where optimization guides and tutorials are central to community knowledge exchange. Johnson (2018) explores how players engage with game mechanics to produce expertise and value, while Taylor (2018) shows how streamers perform mastery to attract and retain audiences in live streaming environments.

Similarly, aesthetic curation is prevalent in lifestyle and simulation games like *The Sims*, *Dreamlight Valley*, or *Skate*, where visual design and mood-setting are monetized through influencer branding and social media engagement. Abidin (2016) and Khamis *et al*. (2017) describe how influencers curate affective and aesthetic personas to build visibility and brand loyalty, a dynamic clearly reflected in the practices of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) creators.

These thematic modes of creative labour also correlate with broader patterns of fan labour and audience interaction. Postigo (2014) discusses how fan labour is structured and monetized within socio-technical architectures, while Walsdorff (2022) examines the shift from unpaid modding to reimbursed creative work, highlighting the precarity of digital labour. Steinberg, Zhang, and Mukherjee (2024) argue that platform capitalism governs not only technical affordances but also cultural logics of visibility and engagement, shaping how creators navigate algorithmic pressures. Huang and Morozov (2025) further show how streamers manage affect and scheduling to sustain promotional value, a strategy mirrored in the branding and audience engagement tactics of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) creators.

Aesthetic and Emotional Curation

Several creators, such as Ceomg, Tofupals, and Miss_pootsie_crossing, center their content around visual aesthetics, emotional ambiance, and mood curation. Cozycore and cottagecore themes, gentle colour schemes, and an emphasis on creating cosy, immersive spaces are characteristics of their work. These content producers frequently refer to their work as a type of digital care, providing viewers with a kind, accepting environment for inspiration and rest. For example, Tofupals produces pastel-toned Instagram reels and relaxing TikToks that depict morning routines and tranquillity. In her interview, she emphasized the importance of "creating a calm space for people to unwind", highlighting the affective labour embedded in her content. Similarly, Ceomg's YouTube channel showcases viewer-submitted islands with soft commentary and cozy aesthetics, positioning her as a tastemaker in the cozy gaming niche. As Ceomg noted, "lots of people tell me my videos have helped them", framing her practice as emotional support for some players. These creators monetize their aesthetic labour through brand collaborations, digital design commissions, and platform monetization tools. Miss_pootsie_crossing, for instance, curates high-polish Instagram content that blends ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) with lifestyle influencer culture, offering seasonal decor inspiration and coordinated outfit posts. She described her motivation as "wanting to make my mark in the world… even if it was just in

the world of Instagram and Animal Crossing", revealing how identity formation and aesthetic labour intertwine. Her aspirational content attracts sponsorships and affiliate partnerships, illustrating how aesthetic curation becomes a viable form of micro-entrepreneurship.

Systems Mastery and Optimization

Creators such as Dagnel and Crossing Channel exemplify a more strategic and mechanical engagement with ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020). Their content includes tutorials, optimization guides, and update speculation, reflecting a deep understanding of the game's systems. These creators adopt an expert–novice dynamic, positioning themselves as guides who help others navigate the game's complexities. Viewers can learn how to maximize efficiency, take advantage of glitches, and optimize island layouts from Dagnel's YouTube videos, like *How Fast Can You Become A MILLIONAIRE in Animal Crossing New Horizons?* In his interview, he defined his job as "teaching people how to play smarter" and stressed how crucial it is to stay ahead of algorithmic trends in order to stay visible. Affiliate links, memberships, and YouTube ad revenue are all part of his revenue-generating strategy. Dagnel explained that "reading people's comments brings me a great deal of joy", showing how expertise and community affirmation fuel his labour. Crossing Channel, meanwhile, acts as a community news hub, producing timely content on game updates, speculation, and fan polls. His videos, like Big *News JUST Announced For Animal Crossing Players!*, are designed to capture community excitement and set the discourse agenda. He described his work as "amplifying the community's voice", while also acknowledging the entrepreneurial pressures of content scheduling and audience retention. Crossing Channel described YouTube as "my full-time job", underscoring the professionalization of fan labour within platform economies. These creators exemplify knowledge entrepreneurship, turning gameplay expertise into monetizable content that serves both educational and entertainment functions.

The practices of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators —particularly those involving aesthetic curation, emotional ambiance, and platform-based branding— are deeply embedded within broader trends in influencer culture. While this connection has been noted, it warrants further theoretical development. Chou *et al.* (2022) provide a valuable framework for understanding how value co-creation in livestreaming environments shapes consumer experience and influences continued engagement. Their study emphasizes how streamers simulate immersive and emotionally resonant experiences through affective performance, interactivity, and strategic visibility —elements that are central to sustaining audience loyalty and platform relevance.

These dynamics are clearly reflected in the branding and scheduling practices of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) creators, who curate cozy, aspirational, or narrative-driven content while maintaining a consistent presence across platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Their work exemplifies the convergence of fan labour, influencer branding, and micro-entrepreneurship,

where creative expression is tightly interwoven with audience management and monetization strategies.

This convergence aligns with the concept of microcelebrity (Senft, 2008; Abidin, 2016), which describes how individuals cultivate public personas through ongoing self-presentation, audience interaction, and algorithmic visibility. ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) creators engage in microcelebrity labour by crafting emotionally engaging content, responding to followers, and adapting their aesthetic and narrative styles to platform trends. These practices are not merely expressive but are also forms of affective labour (Hardt, 1999; Jarrett, 2016), where emotional investment and relational engagement become productive forces within platform economies.

Moreover, the creators' interactions with their audiences often involve parasocial relationships —one-sided but emotionally meaningful connections that simulate intimacy and familiarity (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Abidin and Brown, 2018). These relationships are cultivated through personalized commentary, live chats, and community polls, and are instrumental in building brand loyalty and sustaining engagement. As such, the creative labour of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators must be understood not only in terms of gameplay or fandom, but also within the broader context of platform-mediated influencer culture, where visibility, affect, and authenticity are commodified and strategically managed.

Experimental and Narrative Play

A third thematic cluster includes creators like Graefromtrippyland, Lex Play, and Dr. Dodo, who use ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) as a platform for artistic experimentation, storytelling, and satire. Their content challenges dominant aesthetics and explores the game's potential for narrative and cultural critique. Graefromtrippyland produces different island builds that defy conventional design norms. Her Instagram posts feature clashing colours, chaotic terraforming; in her interview, she described her work as "anti-aesthetic", aimed at disrupting the perfectionism of mainstream ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content. She added, "I learnt that if you can market yourself well you can do anything", linking her experimental ethos to entrepreneurial self-reliance. Lex Play constructs emotionally driven narratives through spatial storytelling. Her YouTube series, such as "Ideas for your island", blends gameplay with narration, anthropomorphizing villagers and crafting themed environments that reflect memory and nostalgia. She noted that "it's not just about building —it's about telling a story, creating a world that feels alive". Her monetization includes long-form YouTube content and community commissions. Lex Play reflected that "through my content creation, I've been able to work alongside GUCCI, Disney, ColourPop", illustrating how narrative creativity can open professional pathways. Dr. Dodo specializes in home makeovers for ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) villagers, using interior design as a form of character storytelling. Her TikTok videos showcase whimsical, themed renovations that reflect each villager's personality, often accompanied by lighthearted commentary. She referred to her work as "bringing out the soul of each home" and her content's charm, originality, and consistency have helped it

build a devoted following. As she explained, "I love it when people tell me they're inspired after watching my videos", highlighting relational creativity as central to her process. These creators serve as examples of how creative experimentation and narrative innovation can be successful business tactics, particularly when niche audiences value uniqueness and authenticity.

Cross-Cutting Dynamics

Across all three themes, several cross-cutting dynamics emerged that further illuminate the entrepreneurial dimensions of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creation. The first is creative labour and time investment. Time commitment ranged from part-time hobbyists to full-time creators. Lex Play and Crossing Channel described content creation as their primary occupation, while others like Tofupals balanced it with other work or studies. As Lex Play explained, "I'm a full-time YouTuber now… it's been an enlightening and inspiring process", highlighting how content creation can evolve into a sustainable career path. Crossing Channel similarly described YouTube as "my full-time job", situating his practice within the broader gig economy of platformized labour. The second is platform use and monetization, which reveals that YouTube and Instagram were the most popular platforms, although creators also used TikTok, Twitch, Ko-fi, and Etsy, and that monetization strategies include commissions, sponsorships, ad revenue, and merchandise sales. Since all creators stressed the value of community, the third is community engagement. Many described their audiences as sources of emotional support and inspiration, and a number highlighted the friendships and partnerships that developed as a result of creating content. As Tofupals noted, "I've met a lot of friends and have started a shop and all of this started with Animal Crossing art", illustrating how creative practice and community connection intertwine. Navigating platform economies is the fourth cross-cutting dynamic. Creators were well aware of algorithmic pressures, content trends, and the necessity of maintaining visibility. Their branding strategies, content formats, and production rhythms were influenced by this awareness.

Collectively, these results show how ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) serves as a platform for micro-entrepreneurial experimentation in addition to being a place for play and creativity. Creators use the game's affordances and community infrastructures to increase their visibility, make money, and develop digital careers —whether through creative storytelling, strategic mastery, or aesthetic curation. These practices are a reflection of larger changes in platform-based economies, where affective labour, entrepreneurial aspirations, and creative expression are increasingly coming together. Crucially, they also draw attention to the conflicts and possibilities that occur when leisure turns into work and when monetization and algorithmic visibility collide with individual expression. In the section that follows, these dynamics are examined in more detail and these empirical findings are placed within the larger theoretical frameworks of playbour, platform governance, and the unstable circumstances of digital micro-entrepreneurship.

Discussion

The findings presented in the previous section illustrate how ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) can operate as a hybrid space where creativity, community, and commerce intersect. ACNH content creators turn gameplay into a form of cultural production that is intricately woven into platform infrastructures through aesthetic curation, systems mastery, and narrative experimentation. This section highlights the opportunities and conflicts that occur when leisure turns into work by placing these practices within larger theoretical discussions on platformization, micro-entrepreneurship, and participatory culture.

Digital games foster creativity through both individual customization and social co-creation. Individual customization refers to personal, player-driven modifications within the game —such as designing island layouts, creating outfits, or decorating interiors in ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020). These practices are often solitary and reflect personal aesthetic choices. In contrast, social co-creation involves collaborative activities that extend beyond the game itself, including streaming, multiplayer events, and community challenges. For example, creators like Crossing Channel and Lex Play engage in co-creative practices by producing content that responds to community feedback, incorporates viewer suggestions, or facilitates shared storytelling experiences. These forms of co-creation are inherently social and rely on interaction with audiences and other creators.

The creative practices of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators exemplify the dynamics of participatory culture as outlined by Jenkins (2006a, 2006b). Players are not merely consumers but active co-creators who shape the aesthetic, social, and economic life of the game. Whether through designing dream islands, producing tutorials, or crafting narrative builds, creators exercise agency and imagination in ways that extend the game's cultural footprint. However, as the data shows, this creativity is increasingly entangled with platform logics that reward visibility, consistency, and engagement metrics. The shift from play to performance, and from hobby to hustle, reflects the broader platformization of creative labour (Nieborg and Poell, 2018).

Thus participatory practices in games are not only creative but also economic. The concepts of playbour and funlabour help illuminate this intersection. Playbour —a term coined by Kücklich (2005)— refers to the fusion of play and labour, where players' activities generate value for platforms and game companies, often without formal compensation. Funlabour, as discussed by Terranova (2000) and Bulut (2015), highlights the affective and enjoyable aspects of digital labour, where passion and emotional investment become productive forces within capitalist economies.

These dynamics were evident in the interview data. Creators like Tofupals and Miss_pootsie_crossing described their work as emotionally rewarding but also demanding, noting the pressure to maintain a consistent aesthetic and engage with followers across multiple platforms. Their content —centred on cozy visuals and emotional ambiance— embodies affective labour, where emotional resonance and relational engagement are central to audience retention and monetization. Similarly, Dagnel and Crossing Channel emphasized the strategic aspects of

content creation, including algorithmic visibility and audience management, underscoring how playbour operates through knowledge production and performance.

Huang and Morozov (2025) highlight how live streamers strategically manage affect and visibility to sustain promotional value within platform economies. This involves not only curating emotionally resonant content —such as humour, intimacy, or aspirational aesthetics— but also maintaining a consistent presence across streaming schedules, social media platforms, and audience interactions. These affective performances are central to building parasocial relationships and cultivating brand loyalty, which in turn drive monetization through sponsorships, donations, and algorithmic amplification. A similar pattern is evident among ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators, who carefully design their online personas, align their content with seasonal or trending themes, and engage with their audiences through comments, live chats, and community polls. Their branding and scheduling practices reflect a calculated effort to remain visible and emotionally engaging in a competitive digital landscape, where promotional value is increasingly tied to affective labour and platform responsiveness.

This transformation is also particularly evident in the emergence of micro-entrepreneurial practices. Creators like Miss_pootsie_crossing and Dagnel monetize their content through sponsorships, ad revenue, and commissions, while others like Lex Play and Dr. Dodo cultivate niche audiences through storytelling. These practices align with what Abidin (2016) and Khamis *et al.* (2017) describe as microcelebrity labour: a form of self-branding that blends authenticity, affective labour, and algorithmic visibility. The quality of the content is not the only factor that determines the creators' ability to make money; they also need to be able to manage platform dynamics, establish parasocial connections, and stay active across a variety of channels. The results also highlight platform-based entrepreneurship's ambivalence. While some creators have been successful in making money from their passion, others are still in a precarious position because of the emotional demands of continuously producing content, changing audience interests, and algorithmic volatility. This illustrates the inequities of platform economies, in which the majority of creators function in an environment of uncertainty and self-exploitation, while a small number of creators receive high rewards (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019; Scholz, 2013). Here, the idea of playbour (Kücklich, 2005) is especially helpful since it illustrates how play and work are intertwined and how, in digital capitalism, enjoyment itself becomes a productive force.

As Steinberg *et al.* (2024) argue, platform capitalism not only structures the technical affordances of digital media —such as modular design, algorithmic governance, and data-driven personalization— but also shapes the cultural logics through which visibility, engagement, and monetization are pursued and valued. These logics create a competitive and performative environment in which creators must continuously adapt their content, branding, and interaction strategies to remain relevant within platform ecosystems. In the case of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators, this manifests in practices such as optimizing upload schedules, curating aesthetic styles to match trending themes,

and leveraging cross-platform presence to maximize reach and revenue. Their experiences reflect the broader dynamics of platform capitalism, where creative labour is increasingly mediated by infrastructural constraints and commercial imperatives, and where success is often contingent on navigating opaque algorithms and fluctuating audience expectations.

Moreover, the study highlights the role of social infrastructures in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes. Community norms, fan cultures, and collaborative networks provide emotional support, creative inspiration, and informal mentorship. These relational dynamics are crucial for preserving the resilience and engagement of creators, but they also run the risk of becoming commodities in platform logics that prioritize engagement and virality. According to Pearce (2009) and Taylor (2018), the commodification of intimacy and authenticity raises serious questions about the ethics and sustainability of digital creative labour.

ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) offers a compelling case for understanding how digital games function as ecosystems of co-creation, cultural expression, and economic activity. Different types of micro-entrepreneurship are made possible by the game's open-ended design, active fan base, and platform affordances. The way these opportunities are influenced by more significant structural factors, like platform governance, algorithmic control, and market pressures, complicates the idea that a participatory culture is only empowering. The findings call for a deeper understanding of how players navigate the risks and rewards of platform-mediated entrepreneurship as well as the ways that creativity, labour, and value intersect among contemporary game cultures.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This exploratory study investigated how a specific group of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators engage in creative and entrepreneurial practices within platformized gaming environments. Through qualitative analysis of interviews and online content, the research identified three distinct modes of creative labour —narrative experimentation, systems mastery, and aesthetic curation— alongside cross-cutting dynamics such as affective labour, monetization strategies, and community engagement.

Rather than generalizing across the entire ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) player base, the study focused intentionally on prominent content creators active on social media platforms. Their experiences offer insight into how digital games can serve as hybrid spaces where creativity, community, and commerce intersect. However, these findings are illustrative rather than representative, and should be understood within the context of platform visibility and creator influence.

The results align with and extend earlier research in online game communities. For example, Pearce's (2009) work on emergent player cultures emphasizes the importance of grassroots creativity and community norms in shaping digital play. The creators in this study similarly rely on informal networks, shared aesthetics, and collaborative feedback loops to sustain their visibility and

engagement. Pearce's notion of "communities of play" is reflected in the way ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) creators build emotional connections with their audiences and co-create meaning through shared narratives and aesthetics.

At the same time, the findings resonate with Finja Walsdorff's (2022) analysis of modding and monetization, which highlights the precarious transition from unpaid fan labour to reimbursed creative work. ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) creators navigate similar tensions, balancing passion-driven content with the pressures of algorithmic performance and monetization. Walsdorff's concept of "precarious playbour" is evident in the creators' accounts of burnout, content fatigue, and the need to maintain visibility across multiple platforms. These dynamics underscore the ambivalence of platform-based entrepreneurship, where creative autonomy is often constrained by commercial and technical infrastructures.

By situating the findings within these broader scholarly conversations, the study contributes to a growing body of literature on the intersections of digital labour, participatory culture, and platform capitalism. It reinforces the view that creative labour in gaming is not merely playful or expressive, but deeply embedded in systems of value extraction, visibility management, and emotional investment.

Future research should expand beyond this specific creator profile to include comparative analyses across different game genres, platform ecosystems, and cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies could also illuminate how creators' trajectories evolve, particularly in relation to shifting platform policies, audience dynamics, and economic sustainability. As digital games continue to blur the boundaries between leisure and labour, it becomes increasingly important to critically examine the conditions under which creative work is produced, valued, and monetized.

Cátia Ferreira holds a PhD in Communication Studies from Catholic University of Portugal. Currently, she is assistant professor at the Faculty of Human Sciences, at Catholic University of Portugal. She is a main researcher at CECC (Research Centre for Communication and Culture) and collaborating researcher at CETAPS (Centre for English, Translation, and Anglo-Portuguese Studies). Her research and teaching areas focus on media studies, in particular digital media: digital games, audiovisual and multimedia communication, and emerging strategies for content production, such as transmedia and cross-media.

Carla Ganito. PhD in Communication Sciences. Associate professor and coordinator of International Relations at the Faculty of Human Sciences of Catholic University of Portugal (FCH- UCP). Carla Ganito is a main researcher at CECC where she coordinates the group on Digital Literacy and Cultural Change. She has been an MC member of the COST Action IS1404 - Evolution of reading in the age of digitization (E-READ). Carla Ganito lectures in the fields of digital communication, cyberculture, digital transformation. Her

research has four main axes: mobile technologies, gender and technology, digital literacy, namely digital reading, and digital life and cultural change. From the most recent publications: (2018) *Gendering old age: The role of mobile phones in the experience of aging for women*, IGI; (2017) *Gendering the mobile phone: A life course approach*, in Digital Technologies and Generational Identity: ICT Usage Across the Life Course, Routledge [book chapter]; (2016) *Women speak: Gendering the mobile phone*, UCP [book]

Soraia Gonçalves. MA in Communication Studies, specialization of Internet and New Media. Her research focuses on digital games.

References

Abidin, Crystal (2016). Visibility labour. *Media International Australia, 161*(1), 86-100.

Abidin, Crystal and Brown, Megan Lindsay (2018). Introduction. In Crystal Abidin and Megan Lindsay Brown (Eds.), *Microcelebrity around the globe: Approaches to cultures of internet fame* (pp. 1-16). Emerald Publishing.

Albiges, Luke (2021, April 16). Animal Crossing: New Horizons review – A relaxing island escape with surprising depth. *TechRadar*. https://www.techradar.com/reviews/animal-crossing-new-horizons

Banks, John (2013). *Co-creating videogames*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Banks, John and Humphreys, Sal (2008). The labour of user co-creators: Emergent social network markets? *Convergence, 14*(4), 401-418.

Blanco-Herrera, Jorge A.; Gentile, Douglas A., and Rokkum, Jeffrey N. (2019). Video games can increase creativity, but with caveats. *Creativity Research Journal, 31*(2), 119-131.

Bowman, Nicholas D.; Kowert, Rachel, and Ferguson, Christopher J. (2015). The impact of video game play on human (and orc) creativity. In Garo P. Green, and James C. Kaufman (eds.), *Video games and creativity* (pp. 39-60), Academic Press.

Braun, Virginia and Clarke, Victoria (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Bulut, Erging (2015). Playboring in the tester pit: The convergence of precarity and the degradation of fun in video game testing. *Television & New Media, 16*(3), 240-258.

Consalvo, Mia (2016). Player one, playing with others virtually: What's next in game and player studies? *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 34*(1), 84-87. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2016.1266682

Consalvo, Mia and Begy, Jason (2016). *Players and their pets: Gaming communities from beta to sunset*. University of Minnesota Press.

Chou, Cindy Yunhsin; Chen, Ja Shen, and Lin, Shao Kai (2022). Value cocreation in livestreaming and its effect on consumer-simulated experience and continued use intention. *International Journal of Consumer Studies, 46*(6), 2183-2199. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12784

Dijck, José van; Poell, Thomas, and Waal, Martjin de (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford University Press.

Dyer-Witheford, Nick and Peuter, Greig de (2009). *Games of empire: Global capitalism*

and video games. University of Minnesota Press.

Edelmann, Noella (2022). Digitalisation and developing a participatory culture. In Yannis Charalabidis, Leif Skiftenes Flak, and Gabriela Viale Pereira (Eds.), *Scientific foundations of digital governance and transformation* (pp. 415-435). Springer.

Getzels, Jacob W. and Csikszentmihalyi, Mihali (1976). *The creative vision: A longitudinal study of problem finding in art*. Wiley.

Hall, Johanna; Stickler, Ursula; Herodotou, Christothea, and Iacovides, Ioanna (2019). Player conceptualizations of creativity in digital entertainment games. *Convergence, 26*(5-6), 1226-1247.

Hall, Johanna; Stickler, Ursula; Herodotou, Christothea, and Iacovides, Ioanna (2020). Expressivity of creativity and creative design considerations in digital games. *Computers in Human Behavior, 105*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.106206

Hardt, Michael (1999). Affective labor. *Boundary 2, 26*(2), 89-100.

Horton, Donald and Wohl, R. Richard (1956). Mass communication and parasocial interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, *19*(3), 215-229.

Howard-Jones, Paul A.; Taylor, Jayne, and Sutton, Lesley (2002). The effect of play on the creativity of young children during subsequent activity. *Early Child Development and Care, 172*(4), 323-328.

Huang, Yufeng and Morozov, Ilya (2024). The promotional effects of live streams by Twitch Influencers. https://ssrn.com/abstract=4065064 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4065064

Jackson, Linda A. (2012). The upside of videogame playing: Positive impacts on development. *Games for Health Journal, 1*(6), 452-455.

Jackson, Linda A.; Witt, Edward A.; Games, Ivan Alex; Fitzgerald, Hiram E.; Eye, Alexander von, and Yong, Yong (2012). Information technology use and creativity: Findings from the children and technology project. *Computers in Human Behavior, 28*, 370-376.

Jarrett, Kylie (2016). *Feminism, labour and digital media: The digital housewife*. Routledge.

Jenkins, Henry (2006a). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York University Press.

Jenkins, Henry (2006b). *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Exploring participatory culture*. New York University Press.

Jenkins, Henry (2013). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. Routledge.

Johnson, Mark R. (2018). *The unpredictability of gameplay: Exploring game design and player experience*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Johnson, Mark R. and Woodcock, Jamie (2018). The impacts of live streaming and Twitch.tv on the video game industry. *Media, Culture & Society, 41*(5), 670-688. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718818363

Khamis, Susie; Ang, Lawrence, and Welling, Raymond (2017). Self-branding, micro-celebrity, and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity Studies, 8*(2), 191-208.

Kücklich, Julian (2005). Precarious playbour: Modders and the digital games industry. *Fibreculture Journal*, *5*. http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/

Lamerichs, Nichole (2018). *Productive fandom: Intermediality and affective reception in fan cultures*. Amsterdam University Press.

Lastowka, Greg (2010). *Virtual justice: The new laws of online worlds*. Yale University Press.

Laszkiewicz, Anna and Kalinska-Kula, Magdalena (2023). Virtual influencers as an emerging marketing theory: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, *47*(6), 2479-2494. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12889

Lieberman, J. Nina (1977). *Playfulness: Its relationship to imagination and creativity*. Academic Press.

MacDonald, Keza (2020). Animal Crossing: New Horizons is the escape we all need right now. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/games/2020/mar/16/animal-crossing-new-horizons-review-nintendo-switch

Mainemelis, Charalampos and Ronson, Sarah (2006). Ideas are born in fields of play: Towards a theory of play and creativity in organizational settings. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 27*, 81-131.

Moffat, David C.; Crombie, William, and Shabalina, Olga (2017). Some video games can increase the player's creativity: Results of an experimental study. *International Journal of Game-Based Learning, 7*(2), 35-46. https://doi.org/10.4018/IJGBL.2017040103

Nieborg, David B. and Poell, Thomas (2018). The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. *New Media & Society, 20*(11), 4275-4292. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694

Nielsen, Daniel (2022). Participatory cultures of digital games: The case of modding. *Baltic Screen Media Review, 10*(1), 74-94.

Nintendo EPD (2020). *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* [Video game]. Nintendo.

Ott, Michela and Pozzi, Francesca (2012). Digital games as creativity enablers for children: A study of the impact of game design on creativity. *Behavior and Information Technology, 31*(10), 1011-1019.

Pearce, Celia (2009). *Communities of play: Emergent cultures in multiplayer games and virtual worlds*. MIT Press.

Peuter, Greig de (2011). Creative economy and labor precarity: A contested convergence. *Journal of Communication Inquiry, 35*(4), 417-425. https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859911416362

Peuter, Greig de and Dyer-Witheford, Nick (2005). A playful multitude? Mobilising and counter-mobilising immaterial game labour. *Fibreculture Journal, 5*. http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-024-a-playful-multitude-mobilising-and-counter-mobilising-immaterial-game-labour/

Postigo, Hector (2007). Of mods and modders: Chasing down the value of fan-based digital game modifications. *Games and Culture, 2*(4), 300–313. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412007307955

Postigo, Hector (2014). The socio-technical architecture of digital labor: Converting play into work. *New Media & Society, 18*(2), 332-349. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814541527

Reynolds, Ollie (2024, January 5). The best-selling Nintendo Switch games of all time. *GamesRadar*. https://www.gamesradar.com/best-selling-nintendo-switch-games/

Russ, Sandra W.; Robins, Andrew L., and Christiano, Beth A. (1999). Pretend play: Longitudinal prediction of creativity and affect in fantasy in children. *Creativity Research Journal, 12*(2), 129-139.

Scholz, Trebor (Ed.). (2013). *Digital labor: The internet as playground and factory*. Routledge.

Senft, Theresa M. (2008). *Camgirls: Celebrity and community in the age of social networks*. Peter Lang

Sotamaa, Olli (2010). When the game is not enough: Motivations and practices among computer game modding culture. *Games and Culture, 5*(3), 239-255.

Srnicek, Nick (2017). Platform Capitalism. Polity Press.

Steinberg, Marc; Zhang, Lin, and Mukherjee, Rahul (2024). Platform capitalisms and platform cultures. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *28*(1), 21-29. https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779231223544

Sternberg, Robert J. (1988). *The nature of creativity: Contemporary psychological perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.

Sundar, S. Shyam and Hutton, Elizabeth (2010). Can video games enhance creativity? Effects of emotion generated by Dance Dance Revolution. *Creativity Research Journal, 22*(3), 294-303.

Taylor, T. L. (2006). *Play between worlds: Exploring online game culture*. MIT Press.

Taylor, T. L. (2018). *Watch me play: Twitch and the rise of game live streaming*. Princeton University Press.

Terranova, Tiziana (2000). Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy. *Social Text, 18*(2), 33-58.

Walsdorff, Finja (2022). Video game modding and money. From precarious playbor to reimbursed labor of love. *SpielFormen*, Jg. 2, 163-188.

Woodcock, Jamie and Johnson, Mark R. (2019). The affective labor and performance of live streaming on Twitch.tv. *Television & New Media, 20*(8), 813-823. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419851077.

Tripodos, number 59 | 2026 | 76-97
ISSN: 1138-3305

Received: 12-06-25
Accepted: 11-11-25
OnlineFirst: 17-03-26
Final publication: 01-06-26

Designing for monetization: A taxonomy of dark patterns in top-grossing GaaS video games

Sergio Gutiérrez-Manjón
Complutense University of Madrid (Spain)
Salvador Gómez-García
Complutense University of Madrid (Spain)
Gema Bonales-Daimiel
Complutense University of Madrid (Spain)

This article examines the highest-grossing free-to-play video games of 2024 to identify the use of dark design patterns as core monetization strategies. Drawing on a taxonomy organized around temporal, monetary, and social dimensions, the study analyses nine representative GaaS titles on mobile and console platforms. The findings reveal a denser and more aggressive deployment of these practices in mobile games, where mechanics such as daily rewards, opaque virtual currencies, loot boxes, and socially driven incentives converge. Several of these tactics closely mirror gambling dynamics, raising ethical concerns over compulsive spending, particularly among younger audiences. This research underscores the need for enhanced digital literacy, stronger regulatory frameworks, and further research into user self-regulation mechanisms within increasingly monetized play environments.

Este artículo examina los videojuegos free-to-play con más ingresos del 2024 para identificar el uso de patrones de diseño oscuros centrados en estrategias de monetización. Basándose en una taxonomía organizada en torno a dimensiones temporales, monetarias y sociales, el estudio analiza nueve títulos GaaS representativos en plataformas móviles y de consola. Los resultados apuntan a un despliegue más denso y agresivo de estas prácticas en los juegos para móviles, donde convergen mecánicas como las recompensas diarias, las monedas virtuales opacas, las cajas de botín y los incentivos sociales. Varias de estas tácticas reflejan fielmente la dinámica del juego, lo que suscita preocupaciones éticas sobre el gasto compulsivo, especialmente entre el público más joven. Esta investigación subraya la necesidad de reforzar la alfabetización digital, consolidar marcos regulatorios más sólidos y profundizar en la investigación sobre los mecanismos de autorregulación de los usuarios en

Doi.org/10.51698/tripodos.2026.59.05

Keywords: *Game-as-a-Service (GaaS), dark patterns, monetization strategies, persuasive communication, digital literacy.*

Palabras clave: *juego como servicio (GaaS), patrones oscuros, estrategias de monetización, comunicación persuasiva, alfabetización digital.*

Over the past five decades, the video game industry has evolved from a niche market into one of the most dynamic and influential sectors within the cultural and creative industries (Lesser and Woodliffe, 2024). In 2024, it generated 187 billion dollars in global revenue, with 92.6 billion dollars attributed to the mobile segment (Pamboris and Bruno, 2024). This surge in mobile earnings is closely linked to the widespread adoption of monetization models deemed particularly effective (Niknejad *et al.,* 2024), including free-to-play (F2P) formats, microtransactions, and subscription-based services.

The increasing prevalence of these monetization strategies reflects not only a shift in consumer behaviour but also an industry-wide imperative to ensure profitability, particularly for high-budget "Triple-A" productions. The significant financial investments required for such titles have driven developers and publishers to adopt commercial models that go beyond the traditional one-time purchase framework, instead favouring mechanisms for ongoing revenue generation (Dillon and Cohen, 2014; Ahmad *et al*., 2017). As of 2024, microtransactions accounted for 58 % of PC gaming revenue and 38 % of console gaming revenue (Rosier *et al*., 2025).

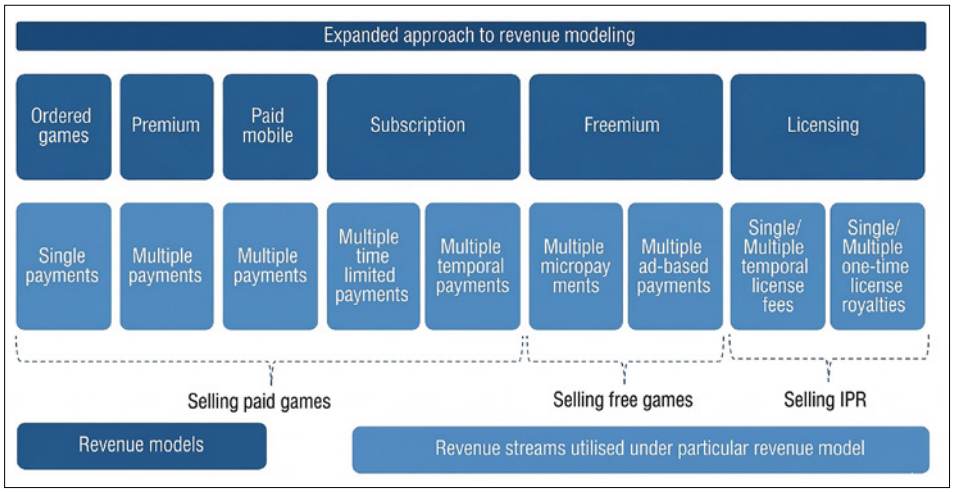
This transformation of video games in business models is illustrated in Figure 1, emphasizing the shift from traditional one-time purchases to ongoing monetization strategies, primarily driven by microtransactions and subscription services. This structural change has reshaped the relationship between developers and players, creating new commercial opportunities that extend the life cycle of digital entertainment products (Landoni *et al*., 2020).

In this context, the Game as a Service (GaaS) model has gained prominence, consolidating throughout the 2010s alongside the expansion of freemium schemes illustrated in the previous figure. GaaS combines free-to-play access with paid additional content and relies on fully digital distribution, which has fostered new patterns of consumption in both games acquisition and in-game spending (Kaleva, Jari-Pekka, 2022).

By the 2020s, the model has become firmly established. The game industry, increasingly dominated by large corporate conglomerates, has broadly embraced these practices, utilizing digital distribution platforms such as Apple Store, Play Store, Steam, GOG.com, and Epic Games Store as the primary environment for their GaaS strategy (Kaleva, 2022). It should be noted, however, that this trend is often

driven by top-down publishers and conglomerate mandates, and many developers have expressed significant disagreement with these business models. This internal friction is confirmed by recent industry data, such as the State of the Game Industry Report 2025, which found that a plurality of developers (42 %) is explicitly "not interested" in working on GaaS titles, citing concerns about predatory monetization, market saturation, and burnout (Game Developers Conference, 2025).

Figure 1. Revenue models leveraged by video game companies



Source: Klimas (2017, p. 132).

Also referred to as live-service games, GaaS titles are characterized by the continuous delivery of content throughout the product's lifecycle —whether through micropayments for expansions, season passes, or subscription models (Dubois and Weststar, 2022). This strategy allows for an extended commercial lifespan of the product and sustained user engagement through regular updates, enhancements, and special events (Hussain *et al.*, 2023).

Although free-to-play models are often portrayed as accessible due to the absence of an upfront cost, they fundamentally depend on monetization strategies to achieve profitability. As a result, developers have implemented mechanisms specifically aimed at converting users into paying customers. In many instances, these strategies have been criticized for their intrusive or aggressive nature and for encouraging consumption patterns commonly referred to as "predatory monetization practices" (Davidovici-Nora, 2014).

Strategies such as the use of in-game currency —virtual tokens purchased with real money to acquire items within the base game— or the purchase of loot boxes, in which the contents are randomized and only revealed upon opening, have become widespread (Ivanov *et al.*, 2021). This diversification of revenue models has raised concern within the academic community regarding their potential impact on consumers, particularly concerning random reward mechanisms

that may foster compulsive spending behaviours (Zendle and Cairns, 2018). These mechanics are intentionally designed to be highly engaging, offering reinforcements and rewards that encourage prolonged and repetitive use (Spicer *et al.*, 2021), which previous studies have found to resemble the psychological mechanisms used in gambling (Hidalgo, 2019).

As a result, several countries, including Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, banned or restricted certain microtransactions such as loot boxes to protect younger audiences (Arjona and Muñoz, 2020). Meanwhile, others such as Spain are debating regulatory frameworks prohibiting minors from accessing randomized reward systems in video games (Ministerio de Derechos Sociales, Consumo y Agenda 2030, 2024), and have more recently launched a nationwide awareness campaign —*"Menos loot boxes, más real gamers"* ["Fewer loot boxes, more real gamers"]— to inform young players and their families about the risks of these monetization mechanics (Ministerio de Derechos Sociales, Consumo y Agenda 2030, 2025).

Against this backdrop, marked by increasing complexity in monetization models and the sustained expansion of GaaS, it becomes essential to examine how the most profitable video games currently implement these strategies, and what implications they hold both for the industry and for player experience. The significance of this research line is reinforced by examining which titles generated the highest revenues in 2024. In the market of PC and consoles Simon (2024), a video game market analyst at Newzoo, highlights: *EA Sports College Football 25* (EA Sports, 2024), *EA Sports FC 25* (EA Sports, 2024), *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017), *NBA 2K25* (2K Games, 2024), and *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science, 2024). In the mobile sector, Clement (2025), a senior industry researcher at Statista, points to *Honor of Kings* (Tencent Games, 2015), *Monopoly Go!* (Scopely, 2023), *Royal Match* (Dream Games, 2021), *Roblox* (Roblox Corporation, 2006), and *PUBG Mobile* (Tencent Games, 2018) as major benchmarks. Except *Black Myth: Wukong*, all these titles operate under the GaaS model, making them highly representative case studies for assessing the current state of the industry.

This analysis aims not only to map some of the contemporary forms of exploitation within the video game industry but also to provide a foundation for identifying the ethical, psychological, and economic implications of such practices. To this end, the study draws on the theoretical framework of dark patterns as applied to gaming. Originally, these patterns were defined as deliberately crafted strategies employed by developers to elicit negative player experiences that conflict with the players' own interests —often without their fully informed consent (Zagal *et al.*, 2013). In their foundational work, the authors situated these patterns within a broad interpretative framework of persuasive design and advocated for the cultivation of manipulation literacy: a critical competency that enables players to recognize when they are being persuaded or coerced into actions that may not align with their best interests. They argue, accordingly, that "once players are literate enough to understand the effects of a pattern so that they can give consent (or the games follow the disclosure principle), the pattern is no longer dark" (Zagal *et al.*, 2013, p. 7).

However, this perspective on literacy as a solution has significant limitations. Critics argue that awareness alone is often insufficient to counteract these

mechanisms. Drawing on foundational work regarding cognitive biases (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974), this counterargument posits that because many dark patterns are designed to target subconscious or heuristic-based cognitive processes, they can remain highly effective even when the user is consciously aware of the manipulation attempt.

Over time, the term dark pattern has become established in the field of digital interaction to describe design elements that manipulate or deceive users into performing actions they would not normally undertake. Although recent scholarship has questioned the precision of the term —arguing that it entails a degree of moral ambiguity— alternative labels such as deceptive design, manipulative design, or deceptive/manipulative pattern have been proposed to address these concerns (ACM, 2025).

Nevertheless, this study chooses to retain the term dark pattern, in alignment with established academic literature that uses it to describe unethical or overtly harmful interface design practices from a consumer perspective. Consequently, the general objective of this research is to analyse the design and monetization strategies implemented in the most profitable video games today, in order to identify, classify, and assess recurring patterns —both traditional and emerging— that structure the gameplay experience under the GaaS model. This approach seeks to offer a critical perspective on commercial exploitation practices in the context of contemporary interactive digital entertainment. To achieve this general aim, the study proposes the following two specific objectives:

- SO1. To design a taxonomic framework of monetization-oriented design mechanics by analysing and systematizing previous theoretical models, with the goal of developing a conceptual tool to identify both established and emerging monetization patterns in video game design.
- SO2. To apply this taxonomy to the analysis of the top-grossing video games of 2024, selected based on their revenue volume and alignment with the GaaS model, in order to detect the presence and recurrence of monetization-driven design mechanics.

This dual objective —both theoretical and empirical— will allow for the observation of the persistence of well-established commercial strategies, as well as the identification of emerging patterns within current monetization logics. Through this analysis, it will be possible to evaluate the extent to which traditional exploitative gameplay strategies are preserved, adapted, or reformulated, thereby contributing to a critical understanding of recent transformations in video game design and their broader implications for players.

METHODOLOGY

This research is structured in two distinct methodological phases, each aligned with the specific objectives defined for the study. It combines an initial literature review phase with a second phase focused on the analysis of design categories,

based on the identification of recurring patterns in selected video games. As previously mentioned, the sample includes nine of the ten highest-grossing video games of 2024. These titles were selected due to their economic relevance and their representativeness of the Game as a Service (GaaS) model: *EA Sports College Football 25* (EA Sports, 2024), *EA Sports FC 25* (EA Sports, 2024), *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017), *NBA 2K25* (2K Games, 2024), *Honor of Kings* (Tencent Games, 2015), *Monopoly Go!* (Scopely, 2023), *Royal Match* (Dream Games, 2021), *Roblox* (Roblox Corporation, 2006), and *PUBG Mobile* (Tencent Games, 2018).

The first specific objective (SO1) —to design a taxonomic framework of monetization-driven game design mechanics— was addressed through a structured review of both academic and technical literature. The review focused on dark design patterns, monetization strategies, and persuasive design in digital games. This stage led to the development of an analytical tool organized into four thematic blocks (temporal, monetary, social, and cognitive-emotional), with observable indicators designed for subsequent application. However, during the refinement phase for empirical application, it was determined that the cognitive-emotional aspects were more accurately described as the *intended outcomes* or *goals* of mechanics within the other three blocks, rather than a distinct category of directly observable mechanics themselves. To ensure the framework's rigor and focus on observable mechanics, the final tool applied in the analysis was consolidated to the temporal, monetary, and social dimensions.

The second specific objective (SO2) —to apply the proposed taxonomy to the analysis of the most profitable games of 2024— was tackled through content analysis of variables and categories, using a binary coding logic (presence/absence of each pattern). This quantitative approach was complemented with brief qualitative notes on the context and implementation of the patterns observed. The analysis was grounded in direct observation of gameplay and monetization dynamics within each title.

To ensure the validity of the analysis, clear criteria for identifying and coding each pattern were established, based on the findings from SO1. The application phase (SO2) was grounded in direct observation of game interfaces, progression dynamics, monetization strategies, and social interaction mechanisms across all selected titles. For each identified pattern, concise qualitative annotations were included to contextualize its specific implementation.

RESULTS

As previously outlined, the findings of this study are organized around two complementary objectives. First, we present the taxonomy developed through the theoretical review, which offers an analytical model for identifying game mechanics linked to monetization strategies. This framework serves as the foundation for the second section, which addresses the empirical application of the taxonomy to the selected video games. Here, we examine patterns of recurrence, divergence, and adaptation within the current industry context.

Proposed Taxonomy of Dark Game Design Patterns

The structure of the proposed taxonomy is organized into three thematic blocks —temporal, monetary, and social— drawing initially from the classification system provided by the website DarkPattern.games, which has been substantiated by the work of Zagal *et al.* (2013). Building upon this foundation, we introduce an updated taxonomy that incorporates both their contributions and subsequent research, with the aim of revising and expanding the conceptual framework for analysis.

The taxonomy is composed of three elements: category, which defines the key concept; descriptor, which explains its meaning; key reference, which identifies the academic source(s) that have studied or validated each pattern. These categories are analytically distinct but not mutually exclusive, some patterns involve, simultaneously, temporal, monetary and social components (e.g., time-gated content that can be skipped with payments or competitive pressure linked to paid upgrades). In such cases, the pattern is placed under the dimension that best captures its primary logic.

Temporal Patterns

Temporal patterns refer to design strategies intended to artificially prolong gameplay and/or foster repetitive behavioural habits. In addition to patterns already identified in the literature, we introduce a new category, "automated play", which adapts insights from Schüll's ethnography of machine gambling interfaces in Las Vegas (2012, p. 175) to contemporary digital games. Whereas Schüll describes how machine features such as auto-play and auto-hold sustain continuous, low-friction wagering cycles, we conceptualise automated play as a dark pattern that delegates core gameplay loops to the system in order to maximise "hands-off" time-on-task in GaaS titles.

Table 1. Types of temporal patterns

Category	Descriptor	Key reference
Playing by appointment (imposed schedule)	The game sets specific time slots to access certain content or rewards, such as limited-time events, fixed schedules, or day/night cycles.	(Veiga *et al.,* 2025)
Daily rewards	Players are encouraged to log in regularly through cumulative rewards for consecutive sessions and/or penalties for inactivity (e.g., progress reset, bonus loss, etc.).	(Veiga *et al.,* 2025)
Task repetition (Grinding)	Repeating low-variety tasks is the only way to progress or unlock new content and upgrades.	(Goodstein, 2021)
Infinite game (or impossible to complete) *-Infinite Treadmill-*	Players are kept in an endless loop of tasks with minimal progress, incentivizing constant play without a clear goal or endpoint.	(Zagal *et al.,* 2013)
Lack of pause/save options	Players are unable to pause the game or save their progress without penalty or loss.	(Krassen and Aupers, 2021).
Forced waiting	Artificial wait times that can be skipped by making payments or watching ads.	(Lewis, 2014)

Category	Descriptor	Key reference
Automated play	The game delegates part of the play loop of the system (e.g. auto-questing, auto-battle, etc.), enabling continuous progression or reward accrual with minimal input.	Authors' proposal based on Schüll (2012, p. 175).

Source: Author's elaboration based on key references.

Monetary Patterns

Monetary patterns are techniques designed to induce players to spend more money than they initially intended, through deceptive incentives, opaque pricing structures, or psychological mechanisms that encourage compulsive spending.

Table 2. Types of monetary patterns

Category	Descriptor	Key reference
Proprietary currency	The value of in-game items is obscured by using an intermediate virtual currency.	(Brignull *et al.*, 2023)
Waste aversion	Offering small leftover amounts that encourage players to spend more real money.	(Zagal *et al.*, 2013)
No spending limit	Players are allowed unlimited purchases with no restrictions or clear warnings, encouraging excessive spending	(Zagal *et al.*, 2013)
Pay to skip	Paying to bypass processes within the game that normally require waiting time.	(Lewis, 2014)
Pay to win	The game offers clear competitive advantages in exchange for payment, disrupting fair gameplay.	(Maisenhölder, 2018).
Subscriptions or recurring fees	Recurring payments designed to generate pressure, anxiety, or fear of missing out, rather than providing constant value to the player.	(Hamari *et al.*, 2020)
Loot boxes	Virtual elements in games that offer random rewards and can be purchased with real money.	(Zendle and Cairns, 2018)
Artificial scarcity	Informing users that a limited quantity of a product is available, increasing its perceived value.	(Mathur *et al.*, 2019)
Anchoring tricks	Manipulating value perception through artificial comparisons that make prices appear "reasonable" by contrast, prompting higher spending.	(Niknejad *et al.*, 2024)
Value degradation	Players must keep spending or investing effort to avoid falling behind due to new items or content that render previous investments obsolete.	(Zagal *et al.*, 2013)
Accidental or unconfirmed purchases	Designing interfaces that mislead users into clicking or confirming a purchase without fully realizing what they are doing.	(Brignull *et al.*, 2023)

Source: Author's elaboration based on key references.

Social Patterns

Social patterns exploit players' relationships with others to encourage continued engagement with the game. These patterns often appeal to obligation, peer pressure, competitiveness, or even manipulation of social networks to attract more users.

Table 3. Types of social patterns

Category	Descriptor	Key reference
Social obligation	Pressure to keep playing due to being part of a group whose collective progress depends on individual actions (e.g., defeating bosses or achieving group milestones).	(Krassen and Aupers, 2021).
Social pyramid and forced recruitment	Requiring players to invite new users as a condition to earn rewards or unlock features that enhance their status.	(Dahlan and Susanty, 2022)
Incentives for antisocial or disruptive behavior	Encouraging players to deceive, manipulate, or betray others in order to advance in the game.	(Zagal *et al.,* 2013)
Competitive pressure	Exploiting players' competitive drive by pushing them to spend more money to climb or maintain positions in leaderboards.	(Veiga *et al.,* 2025)

Source: Author's elaboration based on key references.

Content Analysis

The content analysis involved the systematic identification of dark patterns in a sample of non-mobile games (console and PC) and mobile video games. The analysis focused on elements related to monetization, progression systems, and persuasive design. A comparative approach was employed to evaluate the frequency and intensity of these patterns across platforms, with the goal of identifying both common trends and platform-specific practices that may influence player behaviour.

The procedure was organized into three phases: first, a comparison was conducted among console and PC games; second, the same analytical framework was applied to mobile titles; and third, a cross-platform comparison was carried out to highlight key differences and similarities in the implementation of these mechanisms. To support the visual component of the analysis and enhance interpretability, a table is included summarizing the presence or absence of each identified pattern across the selected games.

Temporal Patterns Analysis in the Sample

Console titles such as *EA Sports College Football 25*, *EA Sports FC 25*, *NBA2K25*, and *Fortnite* exhibit various temporal dark patterns. All analysed games incorporate scheduled events ("playing by appointment") and daily login rewards to foster habitual engagement. Weekly challenges in *Fortnite* or limited-time promotional events in *EA Sports FC 25* and *NBA2K25* generate a sense of urgency and reinforce the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), as illustrated in Figure 2.

Grinding —repetitive tasks required to achieve an in-game objective— is a constant across all games, particularly prominent in Ultimate Team modes by Electronic Arts and Fortnite's Battle Pass. These systems are often coupled with an infinite treadmill design: continuous updates and seasonal content (e.g., *Fortnite* seasons or yearly editions of sports titles) create a perception of never-ending advancement. While offline modes may allow pauses, online modes generally restrict or penalize them. Moreover, wait times and countdowns are frequently

used to subtly enforce a logic of persistent connectivity, further amplified when automated play options keep the progression loop running even when the player is only partially engaged.

Figure 2. Screenshots from MyTeam and Battle Pass systems

Source: *NBA2K25* (2K Games, 2024) and *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017).

In the mobile segment, titles such as *Honor of Kings*, *Monopoly Go!*, *Royal Match*, *Roblox*, and *PUBG Mobile* also exhibit a particularly intensive use of temporal dark patterns. Daily rewards emerge as a key mechanic for user retention —for instance, in Royal Match, users receive prizes simply for logging in daily, fostering habitual play and appealing to FOMO.

Monopoly Go! employs limited-time events and collectible stickers that are only available on specific days, encouraging users to log in frequently and engage for extended periods. Grinding is also a prominent feature, particularly in *Honor of Kings* and *PUBG Mobile*, where significant playtime is required to unlock characters, cosmetics, or abilities —unless users choose to pay—. The infinite treadmill pattern is deeply embedded in these games through perpetual levelling systems, regular content updates, and time-limited events. In Roblox, for example, user-generated content and ongoing events continuously draw players back, reinforcing a cycle of sustained engagement. In several of these titles, automated play tools reduce the friction of grinding by letting the system repeat low-variety tasks on behalf of the player, effectively stretching session length and normalising background, semi-attentive play.

Additionally, most mobile titles impose waiting periods to progress —removable through in-app purchases— and restrict pausing during online sessions. Games like *Honor of Kings* and *PUBG Mobile* demand full-session attention, artificially prolonging playtime and encouraging longer engagement. Altogether, these mechanisms are deliberately designed to extend session duration and stimulate monetization through player retention, with automated play acting as a bridge between temporal and monetary pressures by keeping players connected and progressing even when their engagement is largely passive.

Table 4. Analysis of temporal patterns in the sample

Patterns/ Video Game	EA Sports College Football 25	EA Sports FC 25	Fortnite	NBA 2K25	Honor of Kings	Monopoly Go!	Royal Match	Roblox	PUBG Mobile
Playing by appointment	yes / seasonal events	yes/ events & comps.	yes. Battle Pass	yes. My team	yes. Timed events	yes. Reset loops	no	yes. Game-specific	yes/ timed missions
Daily rewards	likely	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Grinding	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Infinite Treadmill	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Can't pause or save	yes (online)	yes (online)	yes (online)	yes (online)	no pause	no	no	yes	No pause
Wait to play	Timers possible	yes	Time-limited	yes	yes	Wait or pay	Lives system	Timers	Wait or pay
Automated Play	Limited (simulated plays)	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes

Source: Author's elaboration.

In contrast to mobile games, console-based titles tend to employ dark patterns more subtly, primarily through grinding and progression systems linked to microtransactions, such as *MyTeam* or *Ultimate Team*. Mobile games, by contrast, exhibit a higher concentration of dark patterns, often relying on more aggressive mechanics —such as enforced waiting times, mandatory daily rewards, automated play modes, and limited-time events— that push users toward constant engagement. While console titles appeal to competitive commitment and long-term player investment, mobile games exploit daily routines and impulsive consumption behaviours. Both models aim to foster player retention, but they do so with differing levels of intensity and psychological pressure.

Analysis of Monetary Patterns in the Sample

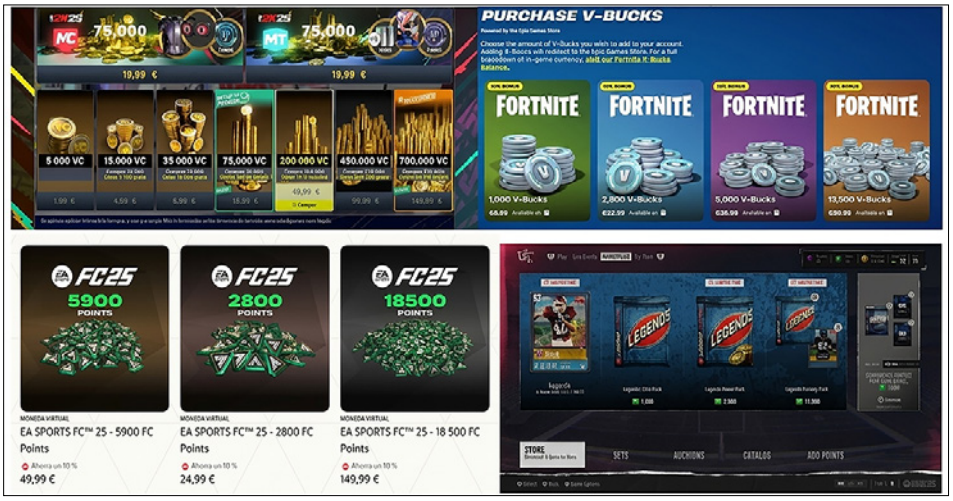
In the analysed console and PC games (*EA Sports FC 25*, *EA Sports College Football 25*, *NBA 2K25*, and *Fortnite*), the widespread implementation of virtual currencies —such as FC Points, Ultimate Team Points, CF Points, MTP, VC, or V-Bucks— stands out as a core transactional mechanism. None of these titles impose spending limits, and all enable pay-to-skip mechanics, allowing players to purchase upgrades, levels, or rewards without completing the required in-game challenges.

Pay-to-win dynamics are also evident, particularly in *EA Sports FC 25, College Football 25, and NBA 2K25*, where acquiring high-performing players through microtransactions grants tangible gameplay advantages. These systems frequently exploit waste aversion, using non-adjustable balances or opaque in-

game currency conversions to encourage further purchases —often through exclusive bundles, default options, or item exchanges that obscure the real-world monetary value—, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Across all titles, randomized reward systems (loot boxes or card packs) are present, along with anchoring techniques that present high-priced bundles as reference points to influence consumer behaviour. Artificial scarcity is also strategically deployed, offering limited-time access to exclusive players or event-related items. Additionally, value degradation affects older cards or items, which lose their utility or appeal after periodic updates, especially in sports titles like *EA Sports FC 25, College Football 25,* and *NBA 2K25*.

Figure 3. Screenshots of virtual currency systems



Source: *NBA2K25* (2K Games, 2024), *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017), *EA Sports FC 25* (EA Sports, 2024) and *College Football 25* (EA Sports, 2024).

In the mobile games analysed (*Honor of Kings, Monopoly Go!, Royal Match, Roblox*, and *PUBG Mobile*), all employ virtual currencies —such as diamonds, coupons, stickers, Robux, coins, or UC— and include randomized reward systems (loot boxes) where users have no prior knowledge of the item they will receive, as shown in Figure 4. None of the titles impose spending caps.

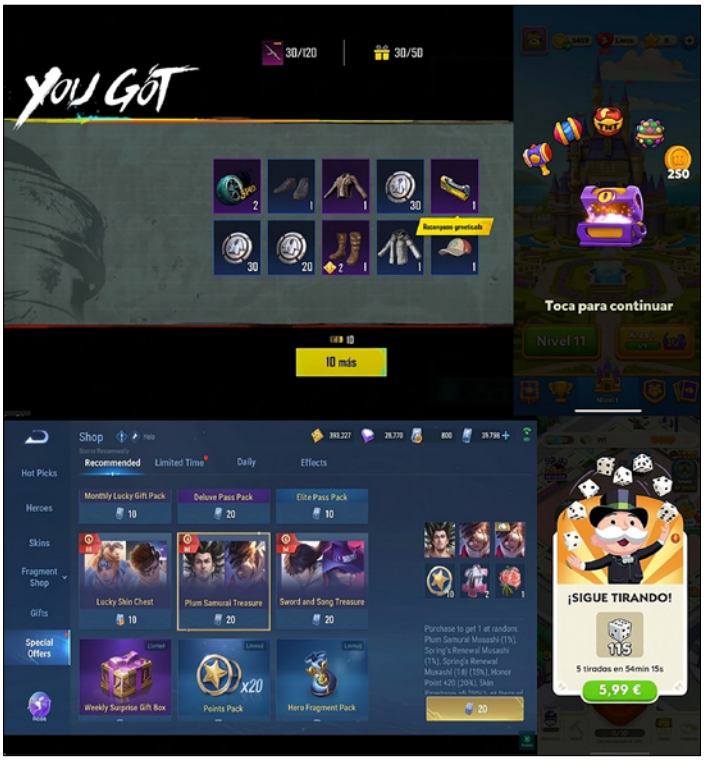
Pay-to-skip and pay-to-win mechanisms are systematically present, granting access to power-ups, exclusive heroes, or gameplay advantages through direct payments. For instance, *Honor of Kings* allows players to purchase heroes outright, while *Royal Match* offers boosters that simplify level progression without skill-based effort. Across all titles, waste aversion strategies are evident —through multiple currencies, leftover balances, or non-intuitive conversion rates that encourage repeated spending.

Artificial scarcity is a consistent tactic, often deployed via limited time offers or exclusive content windows. Anchoring tricks are also common, such as “best

value" bundles or first-time buyer discounts that frame higher spending as more advantageous. Value degradation appears in all mobile games studied, where older items or power-ups diminish in utility after content updates.

Additionally, accidental purchases have been identified in several titles, facilitated by streamlined interfaces or the absence of confirmation steps in the payment process. Four out of the five games analysed include optional subscription models —offering seasonal benefits, VIP passes, or exclusive perks—. *Roblox* is the only exception, lacking a native subscription system within its core monetization structure.

Figure 4. Screenshots of loot box systems



Source: *PUBG Mobile* (Tencent Games, 2018), *Royal Match* (Dream Games, 2021), *Honor of Kings* (Tencent Games, 2015) and *Monopoly Go!* (Scopely, 2023).

Table 5 compares the monetization patterns observed in console/PC and mobile games included in the sample. As shown, nearly all titles display a very high presence of most patterns, with universal use of pay-to-skip, artificial scarcity, anchoring tricks, and value degradation techniques. None of the analysed games implement explicit spending limits. In this regard, *Roblox*, *PUBG Mobile*, *Honor of Kings*, and *Royal Match* exhibit an almost complete monetization profile. In contrast, Fortnite stands out for its distinct and less aggressive approach,

being the only title that does not employ pay-to-win mechanics, loot boxes, or accidental purchases.

The widespread and cross-platform use of monetization techniques —often implemented without adequate safeguards against overspending or impulsive purchases— raises significant concerns, particularly given the popularity and high visibility of the games analysed. These findings highlight how the gaming industry has increasingly normalized such practices as central strategies for maximizing revenue.

Table 5. Analysis of monetary patterns in the sample

Patterns/ Video Game	EA Sports College Football 25	EA Sports FC 25	Fortnite	NBA 2K25	Honor of Kings	Monopoly Go!	Royal Match	Roblox	PUBG Mobile
Currency Type	Ultimate Team Points	FC Points	V-Bucks	Virtual currency	Diamonds and Coupons	Coins and Dice	Coins	Robux	UC (Unknown Cash)
Waste Aversion	Yes – leftover currency	Yes – unspent points	No	Yes – leftover currency	Yes – multi-currency	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Spending Limit	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Pay to Skip	Yes – buy packs	Yes – FC Points	Yes – skip levels	Yes – buy packs	Yes – direct unlocks	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pay to Win	Yes – stronger players	Yes – team advantage	No	Yes – MyTeam cards	Yes – early access heroes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Subscriptions	No (EA Play optional)	No (EA Play optional)	No	Yes – Season Pass / MyTeam Pro	VIP options	Yes – season pass	Yes – pass	No	Yes – Royale Pass
Loot Boxes	Yes – Ultimate Team packs	Yes – Ultimate Team packs	No	Yes – MyTeam packs	Yes – chests and draws	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Artificial Scarcity	Yes – limited players	Yes – event content	Yes – rotating shop	Yes – limited-time cards	Yes – limited-time skins	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Anchoring Tricks	Yes – MVP bundles	Yes – price packaging	Yes – V-Bucks packs	Yes – "Best Value" VC offers	Yes – first-time offers	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Value Degradation	Yes – new players > old	Yes – meta shift	Yes – seasonal reset	Yes - seasonal reset	Yes – power creep	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Accidental Purchases	Possible – quick confirm	Yes – minimal UI checks	No	No	Yes – simplified UI	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Author's elaboration.

Social Patterns Analysis in the Sample

Console and PC games in the sample display strong competitive pressure among players. Moreover, their social patterns reveal greater heterogeneity in design, leading to differentiated implementations: *EA Sports FC 25* and *NBA 2K25*, for instance, reinforce social engagement through collaborative modes such as Clubs or Rush. *Fortnite*, by contrast, introduces more aesthetic and social dynamics, such as inviting friends and sharing achievements. This link is established in previous academic literature based on Kowert's (2020) exploratory review of the negative consequences of online gaming, for example, explicitly identifies toxicity and harassment as prevalent and documented problems within multiplayer gaming culture. This phenomenon is largely facilitated by the 'online disinhibition effect' fostered by pseudo-anonymity (Suler, 2004).

Therefore, building on this established evidence, our analysis defines this risk as moderate to high based on the convergence of three observable features present in all sampled games: the persistent, zero-sum nature of their ranked competitive modes; the use of pseudo-anonymous player identities, which facilitates this disinhibition; and the inclusion of unmoderated or minimally moderated real-time communication channels (both voice and text chat).

In the mobile game ecosystem, social pressure is often encouraged through rankings, shared rewards, and team functionalities. *Honor of Kings* and *PUBG Mobile* integrate complex social frameworks, from clan-based structures to recruitment bonuses. *Royal Match* and *Monopoly Go!* implement friend-invite systems to unlock rewards, as illustrated in Figure 5, which depicts the specific reward-based notification prompts presented to the player. For its part, *Roblox* adds an additional layer of complexity by featuring user-generated games that replicate real-life social interactions.

Figure 5. Screenshots of friend-invite systems

Source: *Royal Match* (Dream Games, 2021) and *Monopoly Go!* (Scopely, 2023).

Overall, the mobile games in the sample stand out for amplifying competitive pressure and promoting constant participation, often tied to monetization mechanics or prolonged engagement strategies. While the most competitive mobile titles (like *PUBG Mobile* or *Honor of Kings*) share the same high risk of direct antisocial behaviour as their PC counterparts, the social pressure in casual titles (*Royal Match*, *Monopoly Go!*) often manifests differently. Here, the mechanics appear less focused on direct toxicity and more on leveraging social obligations, guilt and FOMO to drive both engagement and in-game purchases.

Table 6 compares the use of social patterns in both console/PC and mobile games. The data show that eight out of the nine titles promote high or very high levels of competitiveness, while seven games include pyramid-like mechanisms that incentivize player recruitment. This reflects a consistent logic of social pressure aimed at maximizing engagement, although the implementation differs across platforms. Console and PC games tend to prioritize direct competition, whereas mobile games are more likely to construct social networks built on rewards, rankings, and invitation-based systems.

These differences stem from both the technical characteristics of each platform and their underlying business models: the premium console/PC model promotes competitive excellence, while the mobile free-to-play (F2P) model optimizes retention through persistent, highly incentivized social structures. As a result, mobile games not only replicate familiar social behaviours but also instrumentalize them to support continuous monetization —blurring the boundaries between play, social bonding, and consumer behaviour.

Table 6. Analysis of social patterns in the sample

Patterns/ Video Game	EA Sports College Football 25	EA Sports FC 25	Fortnite	NBA 2K25	Honor of Kings	Monopoly Go!	Royal Match	Roblox	PUBG Mobile
Social obligation	low	high	medium	high	high	medium	medium	medium	high
Social pyramid scheme	limited	encouraged	yes	moderate	moderate	yes	yes	yes	yes
Encourage antisocial behaviour	yes	yes	moderate	yes	yes	yes	not evident	yes	yes
Competition	high	very high	high	high	high	medium	high	high	high

Source: Author's elaboration.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research illustrates how the Games as a Service (GaaS) model has not only established itself as a commercially effective strategy but also represents a broader paradigm shift within contemporary digital culture —reshaping the relationship between producers and consumers of game content. Within this evolving framework, persuasive monetization practices have assumed a central role, influencing not only the economic structure of gaming but also the psychological and social behaviours of modern players.

One of the most striking findings is the convergence between certain design techniques employed by top-grossing video games in 2024 and those traditionally associated with online gambling environments. This phenomenon —a veiled gamblification of game design— maximizes monetization through psychological reinforcement and intermittent reward systems, while simultaneously raising ethical concerns about behavioural manipulation in play environments that obscure their true economic intent. These findings align with a growing body of academic literature. This connection stems from foundational work such as Schüll (2012), who argued that machine gambling is explicitly designed not just for winning, but to "keep them in the zone" of uninterrupted play. This same logic, which seeks to keep users in a frictionless, semi-automatic loop of interaction, is now visibly embedded in modern game design (Zendle and Cairns, 2018; Spicer *et al.*, 2021).

Within the sample, titles such as *Monopoly Go!* and *Royal Match* utilize limited energy systems and near-miss mechanics that encourage compulsive repetition and spending to bypass wait times. *Honor of Kings* and *PUBG Mobile* incorporate roulette wheels, loot boxes, and time-limited events with exclusive rewards —mechanisms designed to heighten urgency and exploit FOMO dynamics. Even in sports games such as *EA Sports College Football 25*, *EA Sports FC 25*, and *NBA 2K25*, monetization expands through modes like Ultimate Team, where acquiring players via randomized packs or simulated transfer markets closely mirrors gambling logics.

In developing a taxonomy of monetization mechanics, this study also reexamines the pervasive use of the term microtransactions in both industry and academic discourse (Davidovici-Nora, 2014; Arjona and Muñoz, 2020; Hamari *et al.*, 2020; Ivanov *et al.*, 2021). This term, we argue, functions euphemistically —obscuring the cumulative and often opaque nature of digital spending by framing costs as negligible, discrete units. As an alternative, we propose the terms fragmented monetization or atomized payments, which more accurately reflect the underlying economic logic: dividing total expenditure into multiple transactions —regardless of individual cost— while emphasizing high frequency and the perceptual dilution of financial impact.

In this context, the prevalence of dark patterns —spanning both temporal and monetary dimensions— has become increasingly normalized. These include daily login rewards, infinite progression systems, pay-to-win mechanics, loot boxes, and the use of ambiguous virtual currencies. Such design techniques are not merely intended to extend playtime but also cultivate consumption behaviours that, in some cases, verge on compulsive, particularly among younger audiences.

Social mechanics further reinforce user retention and platform loyalty. Ranking systems, cooperative tasks, and recruitment-based rewards create environments of social pressure, where continued participation becomes entangled with group dynamics and digital reputation. Rather than enhancing the gameplay experience, these mechanisms often intensify user dependency and normalize externally imposed expectations within multiplayer settings.

Within this landscape, mobile games emerge as particularly fertile ground for the intensification of the Games as a Service (GaaS) model. Their ubiquitous accessibility, low barriers to entry, and persistent presence through push notifications and daily incentives foster fragmented and habitual engagement. In many of the analysed titles, autoplay or auto-battle systems further reduce friction, enabling background progression and encouraging "hands-off" time-on-task. These operational dynamics result in more frequent play sessions and heightened exposure to monetization strategies, positioning mobile platforms as experimental spaces for deploying dark patterns. In contrast to console or PC games —which typically require longer, more immersive sessions— mobile titles promote instant gratification and reinforce short-cycle consumption throughout the day.

Taken together, these persuasive design strategies contribute to a gameplay experience increasingly shaped by commercial logic. Players may lose control over their time and decision-making within systems where reward and spending mechanisms are often obscured. This reality underscores the urgent need for an ethical discourse on the boundaries of persuasive design, as well as a shared responsibility among developers, regulators, and scholars to promote more transparent, equitable, and user-respecting digital environments.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample focuses on a small number of top-grossing GaaS titles, which means that the findings may not generalise to indie games, niche genres, or less commercially successful products. Moreover, the analysis is based on direct observation of design features and does not incorporate player-centred data on how these mechanics are experienced in practice. Future research combining taxonomic analysis with surveys, experiments, or qualitative interviews would help to refine the proposed categories and to assess their concrete impact on different player groups.

In addition, future research should explore user self-regulation strategies, particularly among vulnerable populations such as adolescents and young adults. Insights from psychology (Bernaldo-de-Quirós *et al*., 2021; Labrador *et al*., 2023) on impulse control and digital behaviour provide a valuable bridge between game studies and clinical or psychoeducational interventions. In this sense, progress toward a healthier digital leisure culture will require a genuinely interdisciplinary approach —integrating psychology, communication, and game design— guided by a strong ethical commitment to user protection, media literacy, and sustainable design practices.

Funding sources
This work is part of the project *Persuasive Communication in Video Games as a Service: Problematic Uses among Generation Z – PERVID GEN Z* (PR17/24-

31893), funded by the agreement between the Community of Madrid and the Complutense University of Madrid.

This work is part of the project *Political Radicalization in Digital Playful Environments: Production, Mediation, and Dissemination of Extremist Ideologies – Rage Game* (PID2024-158794OB-I00), funded by the Spanish State Research Agency (Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities).

Sergio Gutiérrez-Manjón, PhD in Audiovisual Communication, Advertising and Public Relations at the Complutense University of Madrid with summa cum laude and international distinction. He is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Theory and Analysis at the Faculty of Information Sciences at the Complutense University of Madrid. His lines of research are digital communication, social media and game studies, which he has published in high-impact journals. He has been visiting scholar at University of Helsinki (2020). He has been secretary of the Spanish Society for Video Game Sciences (SECiVi) since 2022.

Salvador Gómez-García is associate professor in the Department of Journalism and Global Communication at Complutense University of Madrid He is head of Journalism and professor of Journalism Degree. He got his PhD in Media Communication (with an international mention) at the Complutense University of Madrid (2008). Besides this, he holds a BA in Journalism, MA in Documentary Realization and MA in Fiction Screenwriting. Salvador Gómez´s research interest explores the potential of digital games as discourses incorporated in the media outlets (newsgames, interactive graphic, etc.) and the intersection between journalism culture and game culture. This work is inspired by his earlier research on Media History. He has been visiting scholar at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam (Netherlands, 2020), Lincoln (United Kingdom, 2016), University of Paris-Est Marne-La-Vallée (France, 2011), Pontifical Catholic University (Chile, 2009) and the IT University of Copenhagen (Denmark, 2005).

Gema Bonales-Daimiel holds a PhD in Audiovisual Communication and Advertising from the Complutense University of Madrid, where she received the Extraordinary Doctorate Award. She is currently a Lecturer and Researcher in the Department of Applied Communication Sciences at the Complutense University of Madrid.

Her research focuses on the impact of technology on communication, advertising, creativity, and art. She analyses how platforms such as Twitch, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram, as well as technologies like smartphones, voice assistants, IoT, chatbots, and artificial intelligence, are transforming the way brands communicate with their audiences. Additionally, she studies the role of video games, gamification, and virtual platforms in the construction of digital identity, with special attention to Generation Z and new forms of interaction and cultural consumption in hybrid environments.

References

ACM (2025, February). *Words matter: Alternatives for charged terminology in the computing profession*. Association for Computing Machinery. https://www.acm.org/diversity-inclusion/words-matter

Ahmad, Norita, B.; Rahman Barakji, Salahudin Abdul; Abou Shahada, Tarak Mohamed, and Anabtawi, Zeid Ayman (2017). How to launch a successful video game: A framework. *Entertainment Computing*, *23*, 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.entcom.2017.08.001

Arjona Martín, José Borja and Muñoz del Pozo, Vicenta María (2020). La consolidación del modelo *game as a service* en la industria del videojuego. Micropagos, cajas botín y su problemática legal. *Revista Inclusiones, 7*, 229-244. http://hdl.handle.net/10481/64281

Bernaldo-de-Quirós, Mónica; Sánchez-Iglesias, Iván; González-Álvarez, María; Labrador, Francisco J.; Estupiñá, Francisco J.; Fernández-Arias, Ignacio, and Labrador, Marta (2021). Factors associated with the problematic use of video games in adolescents and young people. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction,* 20, 2706-2717. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-021-00543-w

Brignull, Harry; Leiser, Mark; Santos, Cristina, and Doshi, Kosha (2023, April). Deceptive patterns – user interfaces designed to trick you. *Deceptive Patterns*. https://www.deceptive.design/

Clement, Jessica (2025, June). *Highest grossing mobile games worldwide in 2024*. Statista. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1179913/highest-grossing-mobile-games/

Dahlan, Refal Pradama and Susanty, Meredita (2022). Finding dark patterns in casual mobile games using heuristic evaluation. *PETIR*, *15*(2), 185-195. https://doi.org/10.33322/petir.v15i2.1151

Davidovici-Nora, Myriam (2014). Paid and free digital business models innovations in the video game industry. *Digiworld Economic Journal*, *94*(2), 83-102 https://ssrn.com/abstract=2534022

Dillon, Roberto and Cohen, Ori (2014). The evolution of business models in the video game industry. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Managing the Asian Century: ICMAC 2013* (pp. 101-108). Springer. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-981-4560-61-0_12

Dubois, Louis-Etienne and Weststar, Johanna (2022). Games-as-a-service: Conflicted identities on the new front-line of video game development. *New Media and Society*, *24*(10), 2332-2353. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444821995815

Game Developers Conference (2025). *State of the game industry 2025*. https://reg.gdconf.com/state-of-game-industry-2025

Goodstein, Scott (2021). When the cat's away: Techlash, loot boxes, and regulating "dark patterns" in the video game industry's monetization strategies. *University of Colorado Law Review, 92(1),* 285-336. https://scholar.law.colorado.edu/lawreview/vol92/iss1/6/

Hamari, Juho; Hanner, Nicolai, and Koivisto, Jonna (2020). "Why pay premium in freemium services?" A study on perceived value, continued use and purchase intentions. *International Journal of Information Management, 51*, 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2019.102040

Hidalgo Cerezo, Alberto (2019). Loot boxes: Juegos de azar encubiertos al alcance de menores. *Revista Jurídica de Castilla* y León, 47, 25-58. https://www.jcyl.es/web/jcyl/AdministracionPublica/es/Plantilla100Detalle/1131978346397/_/1284841593285/Redaccion

Hussain, Ali; Abid, Muhammad Farrukh; Shamim, Amjad; Ting, Ding Hooi, and Toha,

M. Abu (2023). Videogames-as-a-service: How does in-game value co-creation enhance premium gaming co-creation experience for players? *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *70*, 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2022.103128

Ivanov, Martin; Wittenzellner, Helmut, and Wardaszko, Marcin (2021). Video game monetization mechanisms in triple A (AAA) video games. In Marcin Wardaszko, Sebastiaan A. Meijer, Heide K. Lukosch, Hidehiko Kanegae, Willy Christian Kriz, Mariola Grzybowska-Brzezinska (Eds.), *Simulation gaming through times and disciplines: 50th International Simulation and Gaming Association Conference* (pp. 389-404). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-72132-9_33

Kaleva, Jari-Pekka (2022, August). *A EGDF white paper: Games as a driving force of the 21st century*. European Game Developers Federation (EGDF). https://www.egdf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/EGDF-tech-white-paper.pdf

Klimas, Patrycja (2017). Current revenue (monetisation) models of video game developers. *Journal of Management and Financial Sciences*, *10*(28), 119-136. http://bazekon.icm.edu.pl/bazekon/element/bwmeta1.element.ekon-element-000171523645

Kowert, Rachel (2020). Dark participation in games. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*, 598947. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.598947

Krassen, Cindy and Aupers, Stef (2021). Pressure to play: Social pressure in online multiplayer games. *The Information Society*, *38*(1), 13-24. https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2021.1987364

Labrador, Marta; Sánchez-Iglesias, Iván; Bernaldo-de-Quirós, Mónica; Estupiñá, Francisco. J.; Fernández-Arias, Ignacio; Vallejo-Achón, Marina, and Labrador, Francisco J. (2023). Video game playing and Internet gaming disorder: A profile of young adolescents. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *20*(24), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20247155

Landoni, Paolo; Dell'era, Claudio; Frattini, Federico; Petruzzelli, Antonio Messeni; Verganti, Roberto, and Manelli, Luca (2020). Business model innovation in cultural and creative industries: Insights from three leading mobile gaming firms. *Technovation*, *92*, 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.technovation.2019.102084

Lesser, Hendrik and Woodliffe, Hester (2024, June). *2022 European video games industry insight report*. European Game Developers Federation (EGDF). https://www.egdf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/2022-European-video-games-industry-insight-report.pdf

Lewis, Chris (2014). *Irresistible Apps: Motivational design patterns for apps, games, and web-based communities*. Apress: Berkeley. https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-1-4302-6422-4

Maisenhölder, Patrick (2018). Why should I play to win if I can pay to win. Economic inequality and its influence on the experience of non-digital games. *Well Played*, *7*(1), 60-83. http://repository.cmu.edu/etcpress/80

Mathur, Arunesh; Acar, Gunes; Friedman, Michael J.; Lucherini, Eli; Mayer, Jonathan; Chetty, Marshini, and Narayanan, Arvind (2019). Dark patterns at scale: Findings from a crawl of 11K shopping websites. In Airi Lampinen; Darren Gergle and David A. Shamma (Dirs.), *Proceedings of the ACM on human-computer interaction. Association for Computing Machinery* (pp. 1-32). https://doi.org/10.1145/3359183

Ministerio de Derechos Sociales, Consumo y Agenda 2030 (2025, October 15). Consumo lanza una campaña para advertir de los peligros de las 'cajas botín' en los videojuegos [Press release]. Gobierno de España. https://www.dsca.gob.es/es/

comunicacion/notas-prensa/consumo-lanza-campana-advertir-peligros-cajas-botin-videojuegos

Ministerio de Derechos Sociales, Consumo y Agenda 2030 (2024, June). *El Ministerio de Consumo prohíbe el acceso de menores a las cajas botín en videojuegos para evitar conductas adictivas*. Dirección de Seguridad de Consumo y de la Agenda. https://www.dsca.gob.es/es/comunicacion/notas-prensa/ministerio-consumo-prohibe-acceso-menores-cajas-botin-videojuegos-evitar

Niknejad, Sam; Mildner, Thomas; Zargham, Nima; Putze, Sussane, and Malaka, Rainer (2024). Level up or game over: Exploring how dark patterns shape mobile games. In Andrii Matviienko; Jasmin Niess and Thomas Kosch. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Mobile and Ubiquitous Multimedia,* pp. 148-156). https://doi.org/10.1145/3701571.3701604

Pamboris, Alexis and Bruno, Mary (2024, July). *2024 Global games market report*. Newzoo. https://newzoo.com/resources/trend-reports/newzoos-global-games-market-report-2024-free-version

Rosier, Emmanuel; Porter, Ben; Georgiou, Spyros; Wagner, Michael; Long, Tyler; Zhang, Siyi; Hunt, Brett; Mitu, Horatiu; Hoven, Lynn van den, and Buijsman, Michiel (2025, April). *The PC and console gaming report*. Newzoo. https://newzoo.com/resources/trend-reports/the-pc-console-gaming-report-2025

Simon, Lester Isaac (2024, October). *What were the top PC and console games by cumulative revenue in Q3 2024?* Newzoo. https://newzoo.com/resources/blog/what-were-the-top-pc-and-console-games-by-cumulative-revenue-in-q3-2024

Spicer, Stuart Gordon; Nicklin, Laura Louise; Uther, Maria; Lloyd, Joanne; Lloyd, Helen, and Close, James (2021). Loot boxes, problem gambling and problem video gaming: A systematic review and meta-synthesis. *New Media and Society*, *24*(4), 1001-1022. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211027175

Schüll, Natasha Dow (2012). *Addiction by design. Machine gambling in Las Vegas*. Princeton University Press.

Suler, John (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, *7*(3), 321-326. https://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295

Tversky, Amos and Kahneman, Daniel (1974). Judgment under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases: Biases in judgments reveal some heuristics of thinking under uncertainty. *Science*, *185*(4157), 1124-1131. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.185.4157.1124

Veiga, Emerson; Silva, Nabson; Gadelha, Bruno; Oliveira, Hrácio, and Conte, Tayana (2025). Dark patterns in games: An empirical study of their harmfulness. In Joaquim Filipe; Michal Smialk; Alexander Brodsky and Slimane Hammoudi (Eds.). *Proceedings of the 27th International Conference on Enterprise Information Systems* (pp. 470-481). https://doi.org/10.5220/0013365800003929

Zagal, José P.; Björk, Staffan, and Lewis, Chris (2013). Dark patterns in the design of games. Georgios N. Yannakakis and Espen Aarseth (Eds.). *International Conference on Foundations of Digital Games* (pp. 1-8). https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1043332/FULLTEXT01.pdf

Zendle, David and Cairns, Paul (2018) Video game loot boxes are linked to problem gambling: Results of a large-scale survey. *PLoS ONE*, *13*(11), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0206767

Tripodos, number 59 | 2026| 98-114
ISSN: 1138-3305

Received: 12-06-25
Accepted: 24-09-25
OnlineFirst: 13-04-26
Final publication:

Peripheral Games: Chilean Glocalization and the Independent Video Game Scene

José Agustín Donoso-Munita
University of the Andes (Chile)
University of La Sabana (Colombia)
Pablo Quiñonero-Pertusa
University of the Andes (Chile)

This paper analyzes the Chilean independent video game industry through a postcolonial lens, revealing a center-periphery dynamic where technological access does not dismantle cultural hierarchies. A review of 28 Chilean games (2014-2024) shows only one with thematic glocalization focused on Latin America, five with aesthetic glocalization and 22 with grobalization. Despite the high rate of original IP creation, the lack of local content suggests a form of cultural dependency. Chilean developers, inspired by global media, align with international norms, indicating an internalization of dominant tropes.

Keywords: *independent video games, Chilean video games, postcolonialism, glocalization, game studies.*

Este artículo analiza la industria chilena de videojuegos independientes desde una perspectiva poscolonial, revelando una dinámica centro-periferia en la que el acceso a la tecnología no desmantela las jerarquías culturales. Una revisión de 28 juegos chilenos (2014-2024) muestra que solo uno tiene una glocalización temática centrada en América Latina, cinco con glocalización estética y 22 presentan una grobalización. A pesar de la elevada creación de propiedad intelectual original, la falta de contenido local sugiere una dependencia cultural. Los desarrolladores chilenos, inspirados por los medios de comunicación globales, se alinean con las normas internacionales, lo que indica una internalización de los tropos dominantes.

Palabras clave: *videojuegos independientes, videojuegos chilenos, poscolonialismo, glocalización, estudios de juegos.*

Doi.org/10.51698/tripodos.2026.59.06

The global surge of the independent video game movement was influenced by newfound accessibility to technology. This democratization of game development tools and digital distribution platforms, as noted by Paolo Ruffino (2013), dismantled previous barriers to entry, enabling individuals and small teams to create and distribute games without the backing of major publishers.

Concurrently, the Latin American game industry also benefited immensely from this increased accessibility (Frasca, 2024). Both the general independent scene and the Latin American industry witnessed a period of significant growth during the early 2000s up to 2019. A period of expansion documented by scholars such as Sandovar (2017), for the broader movement, and González (2017), Guevara-Villalobos (2021) Robinson (2004), for the Latin American context.

The parallels may induce to think of the Latin American Industry in terms of being independent, however there is a crucial divergence rooted in historical power imbalances (Baeza-González, 2021; Loomba, 2005; Mukherjee, 2017). While technological access may appear to level the playing field, it does not dismantle the deeper economic and cultural hierarchies that structure the global creative market (Baeza-González, 2021).

This paper argues that the Chilean independent video games scene, as a case study, operates within a postcolonial center-periphery dynamic, where the apparent freedom granted by technology is constrained by the neocolonial logic of market, where in the end Latin America is dependent, rather than independent (Marini, 1991).

The subcontinent's marginal position relative to the industry's centers of power —primarily the United States, Europe, and Japan— positions it as a peripheral actor. As Baeza-González (2021) concludes from interviews with Chilean developers and stakeholders, Chile exemplifies this peripheral status, adapting to dominant trends rather than showcasing local identity.

The present research looks to advance a step further by reviewing 28 Chilean games in search for the ones that use thematical, aesthetic or formal glocalization (Roudometof, 2016) strategies, within the grobalization (Ritzer, 2004) phenomena that occurs as an effect of globalization. In order to confirm or confront Baeza-González (2021) view.

INDEPENDENT GAMES AS A CONCEPT

The notion of indie games, much like numerous academic concepts, is "not a fixed or stable idea, and means different things depending on where you are and how it is deployed" (Parker, 2014, p. 1). This ambiguity was recognized early in the field, with Zimmerman (2002) identifying "independence" as an "unresolved problem" (p. 129). And even questioning the existence of independent games.

The term "indie" in games is often defined in contrast to the mainstream (Pedercini, 2012; Parker, 2014). But, while the formal recognition of independent game development is recent, the initial stages of game creation can be said to have been entirely independent.

Furthermore, prior to its identification as a distinct movement, various similar forms of game creation existed, including "amateur, enthusiast, hobbyist, fan, shareware, demoware, freeware" (Parker, 2014, p. 3). Before the term became common, games were being made by regular people, freaks and diversities (Anthropy, 2012). Therefore, simply defining indie games as an opposition to the establishment presents a challenge.

The difficulties arise in other areas. Martin and Deuze (2009) characterized it as a style that appealed to authenticity. However, Parker (2014) noted that this style "has been easily coopted and commercialized into a highly marketable genre for the game industry" (p. 4).

Pinpointing economic independence for indie games also remains as a challenge (Lipkin, 2013). While some scholars believe they function within established commercial systems rather than challenging them (Jahn-Sudmann, 2008), others propose that methods like Kickstarter funding offer independence by reducing reliance on major publishers (Lipkin, 2013). This highlights a dichotomy regarding the true autonomy of indie game development.

One characteristic that could be said is that indie games are often developed by small teams or individuals, a production model reminiscent of the industry's early days before the 1990s. The shift towards larger, more complex games necessitated substantial investments and extensive development teams, as noted by Ruffino (2013, p. 107).

Ruffino's research emphasizes three aspects of independent game development that are relevant for the present study:

1. Freedom as political independence: A drive for emancipation, specifically from economic struggle (Ruffino, 2013, p. 111) —although Simon (2013) observes examples of highly successful independent games.
2. Accessible technology: Developers can create games using free tools and distribute them online without intermediaries, democratizing video game production (Ruffino, 2013, p. 112).
3. Intimacy and individualization: A sense of authorship and a close connection between developers and their games (p. 114).

In the end, it is still challenging to determine if these new game development methods are truly more independent than past power structures, and whether they offer genuine creative and financial freedom (Ruffino, 2021, p. 19).

POSTCOLONIAL LENSE ON THE GAME INDUSTRY

Defining postcolonialism is as complex as it was to define independent games, in this case it implies different cultural experiences —such as South American, African and Asian countries— (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2006, p. 2).

As a theory postcolonialism emerged from anti-colonial activism in Asia, Africa and South America that interrogated colonial practices (Nayar, 2010), the theory itself was born after colonialism; however the term does not imply the

end of it, because this form of thought does not think that its consequences have been overcome, there have been developments of new elites and neocolonial institutions that perpetuate similar problems in post-independent societies, that continue with unequal treatments and exploitations (Mukherjee, 2017).

Nayar (2010) identifies several aspects of postcoloniality; among them, the most pertinent to this study is the utilization of 'Third World' labor within the Information and Communications Technology industries. This phenomenon is mirrored in the Latin American video game industry, a topic that will be further explored in subsequent sections.

Another aspect that relates to postcolonialism and that will be further revised in the Latin American context is the notion of a core and periphery (Potter, 2001), initially linked to geography studies and latter linked to innovation (Eder, 2019), which led to a dichotomous representation of an innovative core versus non-innovative regions (Eder, 2019; Graffenberger and Vonnahme, 2019; Isaksen and Sæther, 2015). In other words, colonized regions became less innovative than colonizers, which led them to a disadvantage position in the global markets, leaving them at their peripheries (Baeza-González, 2021).

The peripheral position of Latin America within the international markets left its countries in a situation of dependence. This concept is elaborated by Marini (1991), who explains it as a relationship of subordination that keep reproducing the dependence, mainly because the Latin American countries entered the international capitalist markets by selling food and raw materials, which only helped to further the industrialization of the centers of power. In essences there is an inequal exchange of goods in the global markets.

To better understand globalization, Roudometof (2016) takes the concept of "glocalization" and develops it further. According to the author the term gained popularity in the 1990's, and it was born to address the limitations of the globalization concept.

In this way, the global would be a concept that understand the world as compressed, the linking of different localities (Robertson, 1995), globalization would be a process in which the world is shrinking. "It follows then that globalization is about speed, and speed involves both spatial and temporal shifts (speed = space/time)" (Roudometof, 2016, p. 10).

On the other hand, glocalization puts attention to both the universalization and localization processes that happen in the 'globalized' world around social, economic and political systems (Roudometof, 2016). In this way the local is not becoming completely dissolved by the universal (Schuerkens, 2003).

Since glocalization can be seen as a better definition of globalization, that understands its nuances, it is important to use another concept as opposed to the glocal. This new concept would be 'grobalization', which is defined by Ritzer (2004) as "imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations, and the like and their desire, indeed need, to impose themselves on various geographic areas" (p. 73).

This process aims for unilateral homogenization overwhelming the local and producing more profit. Grobalization would be the result of colonialism and neo-colonialism (Roudometof, 2016, p. 51). And it relates directly with the theory of

dependence by Marini (1991), because is the result of the subordination in which powerful countries impose their will over the others.

The term glocalization bearers' resonances with the concept of hybridization, with some differences.

Hybridity can be understood as the new forms of culture and identity, produced by cultural interactions (Foulcher and Day, 2002). The exchange that produces hybridity is rarely a symmetrical process of equal exchange, this leads to the peripheral countries to mimic the centers of power (Eko and Widyahening, 2020). Mimicry happens because of an ambivalent relationship between both (Foulcher and Day, 2002). Ambivalence, as described by Foulcher and Day (2002), and Fathi and Dastoori (2014), manifests as both original and authoritative, articulated through repetition and differentiation.

The difference between hybrid and glocal is that hybridity is the result of the mixture of two cultural streams, without specifying the origin of each one; "glocality necessitates the presence of two streams, one of which needs to be local" (Roudometof, 2016, p. 14).

Mukherjee (2017) utilizes a postcolonial perspective to analyze video games, building upon Gikandi's (1996) examination of cricket in India. Gikandi's work highlights how cricket fostered new avenues for identity and self-expression. For Mukherjee (2017) these new spaces talk about a hybridization that results from the former exchange between colonizer and colonized. He illustrates the complexities of the hybridization by commenting on the film *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) in which the cricket game is used by the colonized to beat the colonizers, in other words people from India use the game to "play back" (fight back) against the British.

Gikandi (1996) then applies the analysis of postcolonial issues to videogames, notably *Assassins Creed III* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2012), a game that is about critiquing imperialism, and that features a well-developed native hero, but it is still meant for a white, male, westerner audiences (Shaw, 2015).

THE LATIN AMERICAN GAME INDUSTRY

The history of game development in both Latin America and Chile follows a trajectory emblematic of a peripheral region's engagement with a globalized industry.

Latin American game development traces its roots to the early 1990s (Robinson, 2004) but experienced a surge in studio growth between the early 2000s and 2019. This expansion, mirroring global trends of the independent industry that saw its development during the same age (Chen, 2017; Sandovar, 2017), can be attributed to several factors, some of which are particular to the region, such as the advancement of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) that facilitated game production and consumption during those years (Guevara-Villalobos, 2021); and other global factors, such as technological progress that has democratized several aspects of videogame creation, including animation, testing and distribution tools (Frasca, 2024; Ruffino, 2013; Brand and Baeza-

González, 2024). Although Ruffino (2013) notes that distribution platforms are often controlled by major industry players, which raises concerns about the genuine independence, and in the case of Latin America replicates the relationships of dependence.

Latin America's initial engagement with video games began as consumers on the fringes. Consoles and computers were initially imported by migrants and tourists returning from the United States (Guevara-Villalobos, 2021, p. 222). Yet, early forms of resistance emerged, such as the acquisition of Chinese-cloned FAMICOMS (Penix-Tadsen, 2017), and piracy, which remains an ongoing characteristic of the region's video game market (González, 2017).

The rebellious spirit was continued by reverse engineering and hacking that led to making games based on the modification of existing ones and some original titles (Guevara-Villalobos, 2021; Penix-Tasden, 2017).

Initially, Latin-American countries, particularly Mexico due to its proximity to the United States, primarily served as extensions of global assembly lines. Rather than developing local companies, they were utilized for low-cost production of cartridges and other components for the US and Canadian markets, (Guevara-Villalobos, 2021; Kline *et al*., 2003). The growth of companies in the region was largely absent at the outset. This resonates with Nayar's (2010) vision of the utilization of "Third World" labor in these industries.

In the early 2000s, a small industry started to grow in several countries of the region, the countries that led the movement were Brazil —with somewhere along 300 game maker companies—, Argentina —about 100 studios— and Chile —between 20 to 60— (Guevara-Villalobos, 2021; Xhardez, 2012). Still they only represented about 4 % of the global market in 2017, even though the population of Latin America represents 8.6 % of the world population, almost double of the US (González, 2017). The main trend was for these small companies to develop IP's owned by industries in the center of production (Guevara-Villalobos, 2021; Xhardez, 2012). And if they made their own IP's, they aimed the themes and designs towards the international market (González, 2017).

THE CHILEAN INDUSTRY A PERIPHERAL SCENE IN CONTEXT

The history in Chile follows along the path of the rest of Latin America. It began taking its current shape in the early 2000s, a period that saw the founding of several key players. This growth continued, evidenced by the establishment of the Chilean federation, Video Games Chile (VG Chile), in 2010 (Brand and Baeza-González, 2024, p. 98).

Accurately quantifying the current number of game development companies in Chile remains challenging. VG Chile presently has 25 members (VG Chile, 2025), while estimates suggest a fluctuating landscape, with previous claims of 200 companies down to approximately 150 currently active (Brand and Baeza-González, 2024, p. 97).

The growth of the Chilean industry can be explained in part by the support from state organizations, such as Pro Chile, which has supported missions to

the main market fairs around the world; also the corporation that foments production (known as CORFO) and the Ministry of Cultures, Art and Patrimony, both of which support with funding (Brand and Baeza-González, 2024).

Like the rest of Latin America, many of the Chilean companies do work for hire and develop external IPs, but there are many that create their own. Even though, according to Baeza-González (2021) Chilean developers know that they are at the periphery of this market, which leads to avoiding developing games that might be related to their identity or folklore. And some of their biggest projects end up being funded by international publishers, which also influence the themes and designs that are being produced (Brand and Baeza-González, 2024).

The Chilean and Latin American region's influence on the video game industry has been limited. Predominantly, the United States, Europe, and key Asian markets have driven the industry (Johns, 2006). Since its inception, Japan and the US have been the primary production hubs, later expanding to include other European markets and China, which excerpt cultural dominance over the medium (Baeza-González, 2021). The overwhelming strength of these countries has resulted in a cultural hybridization between them. For example, Atari (an American company) was named after a Go move (a Chinese game), or Taito's (a Japanese company) *Space War* was inspired by *Star Wars* (Consalvo, 2006).

Consequently, Chilean and Latin American studios find themselves marginalized in both consumer and industry labor markets (Guevara-Villalobos, 2021, p. 221). The subcontinent faces disadvantages in this market, with power imbalances causing regional game developers to often neglect local themes and designs (Johns, 2006). This, in time, makes it even harder to establish new themes that come from the peripheries (Lipkin, 2013). Their own productions are done as a reply to hybrid cultural texts, because it is the only way in which they can reach international audiences (Kraidy, 2005). The relevance of the Chilean industry within the world market of games is so small that most Chileans don't even know that videogames are being made in their own country, and there is little said of them in the national press (Brand and Baeza-González, 2024, p.104).

On the other hand, González (2017) believes that "Latin American games have elements that set them apart from regular games in the market". According to the author, these games are considered to be more open to risky themes " such as drug trafficking, prostitution, war crimes, corruption, sexual abuse, promiscuity, poverty, mental illnesses, sexism, and racism" (González, 2017). However these themes don't seem to be strange to many independent games or even to triple A games such as *Grand Thief Auto* (The Chronicle, 2025).

OBJECT AND METHODOLOGY

Starting from what has been stated so far, the present research wants to see: How many Chilean games can be understood as examples of substantive (thematic), superficial (aesthetic) and/or formal mechanical glocalization? To see if the trend is really as it has been stated by the authors mentioned before, particularly

Baeza-González (2021), who recognizes that there are some games that do depict Chilean culture, themes and designs, however they are a minority, becoming the exception that shows the rule: Chile, and Latin-America are at the periphery of the market, and the vast majority of games made by them adapt to trends, not to the national culture.

To answer the research questions this study reviews 28 Chilean games applying a coding framework based on the concept of glocalization (Roudometof, 2016), categorizing each game based on its primary strategy for engaging with global and local cultural elements. As explained in table 1.

Table 1. Glocalization Strategies

Substantive (Thematic) Glocalization	This concept describes games where a global form (the game genre, like an RPG or platformer) is fundamentally shaped by local content (the narrative, setting, characters, and mythology derived from a specific culture). The process can be understood as the refraction of a global wave —the game genre— through the prism of a local culture, creating a new, heterogeneous outcome (Roudometof, 2016, p. 65).
Superficial (Aesthetic) Glocalization	This category refers to games that incorporate local signifiers as decorative or background elements, adding local 'flavor' without altering the core product. These aesthetic touches can be seen as a 'token presence' of the local, designed to make a globally standardized product more familiar or acceptable in a specific market (Bhaduri, 2008, p. 2).
Formal (Mechanical) Glocalization	This category assesses a deeper level of cultural integration where the game's mechanics, rules, and systems of interaction —it's very *form*— are influenced by or derived from local cultural practices or concepts. It involves questioning whether the fundamental way a player interacts with the game world is a refraction of a local logic or worldview, thus challenging the idea that game mechanics are purely universal or globally homogenized structures.
Globalization	Games in this category do not just lack local elements; they are products of a logic rooted in McDonaldization —the principles of efficiency, calculability, control, and standardization— that actively promotes a uniform global consumer culture at the expense of local diversity (Turner, 2003). In summary, these games adhere to the global discourse as hybrids, without local elements.

Source: Own elaboration.

The corpus for this study consists of video games developed by member studios of VG Chile and released between January 2014 and December 2024. This 10-year period was chosen to capture the contemporary state of the industry following the establishment of its primary trade association. To focus the analysis on commercial entertainment products aimed at the global market, educational games and titles created for advertising or marketing purposes were excluded, as their intended audience is often strictly national.

The data collection process involved reviewing the official websites of the 25 member companies of VG Chile. This process yielded a final sample of 28 games from 11 distinct studios. The remaining 14 companies were excluded because they were either in the process of developing their first game, focused exclusively on non-entertainment products, or had no released games within the specified timeframe. The analysis of each game was conducted through direct gameplay where possible, supplemented by watching comprehensive gameplay videos and reviewing descriptive materials on developer and publisher websites. The process

of codification for each game was made by the two researchers, after each one reviewed the games, and agreed upon after discussion.

It is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this selection process. The sample represents a significant portion of the organized, public-facing segment of the Chilean industry but does not encompass the entire landscape. The findings are therefore indicative of trends within this specific cohort and should not be generalized to every game developer in Chile without further research.

In addition to the content analysis, two key aspects of each game's production were systematically recorded to contextualize the findings within the industry's economic structure: (1) Intellectual Property (IP) Ownership; Games were categorized as either "Original IP" (conceived and owned by the Chilean developer) or "External IP" (developed under license for an external rights holder). (2) Publisher Origin: The publisher for each game was identified and categorized as either "Local" (the developer itself or another Chilean firm) or "International" (a publishing company based outside of Chile). This data was collected from developer websites and official digital storefronts (e.g., Steam, PlayStation Store).

This in order to see if the Chilean reality reflects Nayar's (2010) vision, in which the country's industry could be seen as "Third World Labor".

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the 28 games reveals a clear pattern of alignment with global market trends, confirming the peripheral status of the Chilean industry.

Applying the glocalization framework, only one game, *Locuras en el Bananverso* (Newvicon, 2024), could be considered a form of Thematic Glocalization at a regional level. It is based on the popular Uruguayan youtuber "Bananero," whose humor and style resonate widely across Spain and Latin America. The game's protagonist is voiced by the comedian himself, and its dialogue is filled with jokes and references recognizable to his Spanish-speaking audience, representing a clear orientation towards a specific Latin American cultural niche rather than a generic global one. It is still a form of hybridization, since the game world and its mechanics resonates with other 3D adventure games.

Bananero's career and life exemplify the impact of globalization and hybridization, raising questions about whether his humor truly reflects Latin American sensibilities. Born in New Jersey to immigrant parents, he spent time growing up in Uruguay and currently resides in Miami, creating a personal history that blends US and Latin American experiences. His humor, characterized by vulgarity, sexual innuendo, and double entendres, is not exclusively Latin American, with comedians like Benny Hill and Filthy Frank employing similar techniques worldwide. The primary connection to a Hispano-American audience lies in the Spanish language. This is particularly noteworthy as it is the only game where Spanish is the main spoken language (while text can be changed to different languages, voices are in English in all of the other games). This observation supports Baeza-González's (2021) view of Chilean developers operating within a peripheral market that must adapt to dominant global markets.

Five other games utilize Superficial Glocalization, where local culture serves as superficial set dressing. Two of these games incorporate Latin American elements, while the remaining three use Chilean elements. One particular game prominently features these elements through characters from Chilean mythology.

Abyss Odyssey by ACE Team is the sole game that references Chilean mythology and characters in this manner. For example, enemies include a Pudutaur (replacing a Centaur, with *pudus'* being native deer from southern Chile), *ekekos* (an Andean deity), *camahuetos* (mythological creatures from Chiloé), and *huasos* (Chilean cowboys). Even "*La Pincoya*" (a mythological creature from Chiloé) is available as a playable character. However, the overarching theme revolves around an evil abyss, summoned by a sorcerer, which could be situated anywhere in the world. This suggests that despite their prominent display, all these elements are purely aesthetic.

Four other video games incorporate Latin American or Chilean elements into their backgrounds. *Dandi's World* features various artistic movements in its level designs, one of which evokes a well-known Chilean art movement. *Massive Warfare: Aftermath*, a battle game, offers several arenas, including Rapa Nui. Notably, the use of "Rapa Nui" instead of "Easter Island" reflects a local perspective refracting a global influence (Roudometof, 2016, p. 65). The remaining games include Latin American elements such as an Aztec arena in *HeadSnatchers* and the reference to the sun as Inti (the main Incan god) in *Cat's Planet: Inti's Call*, despite the game's primary theme being cats as planets in a cat solar system.

The remaining 22 games fall under the category of Grobalization. These titles adopt established international genres —from JRPGs and platformers to tactical and racing games— without any discernible Chilean or Latin American cultural markers. Their aesthetics, narratives, and character designs are indistinguishable from those produced in the industry's power centers.

In terms of Mechanical Glocalization, none of the 28 games analyzed presented unique gameplay mechanics derived from local culture; all adhered to established global genre conventions, such as sports, games where the player must kill their enemies or survival games. This reinforces the global aspects of all games, including those that used thematic glocalization or aesthetic glocalization, where global mechanics are added to a mixture that already had global thematic and aesthetic elements mixed with local ones.

PROSPECTIVE GLOCALIZATION: GAMES IN DEVELOPMENT

While the analysis of released games presents a stark picture, an examination of projects currently in development offers a more nuanced view, though one tempered by the uncertainties of production.

Several studios are working on titles that explicitly aim for Thematic Glocalization. Austral Games, for instance, states in its mission a desire to exhibit "local culture," specifically "Latin American and Chilean" heritage (Austral

Games, 2025). Their upcoming game, *Curilemu*, is an adventure-horror title inspired by the myths of Chilean Patagonia and set on the recognizable island of Chiloé. Similarly, BCS Studios is developing *Revenant Souls*, a game "inspired by the mythology of southern Chile" (BCS Studios, 2025). ACE Team, the studio behind Abyss Odyssey, is also developing The Mound: Omen of Cthulhu, which, despite its Lovecraftian (and thus global) influence, is set during the Spanish conquest of a region resembling the South American Pacific coast.

However, the potential of these projects is shadowed by the precarious nature of peripheral game development. *Ríos de Lluvia*, a game set in Chile's Maule region, was released in early access in 2021 but appears to have stalled, serving as a cautionary example of a locally themed project that failed to reach completion. The prospects for Revenant Souls may be more promising, as it is being developed by ACE Team which has a large trajectory of games developed (ACE Team, 2020).

PRODUCTION MODELS AND CULTURAL DEPENDENCY

An analysis of the production data complicates a simple narrative of economic determinism. Of the 28 games studied, a vast majority (22) were original intellectual properties created by the Chilean studios. Furthermore, a significant portion (8 games, or 28.5 %) were self-published or published by other local firms. This contrasts with earlier assessments of the Latin American industry, which emphasized a prevalence of "work-for-hire" on external IPs.

This high rate of original IP creation, when juxtaposed with the profound lack of local cultural content, points to a more subtle and deeply ingrained form of cultural dependency. Chilean developers are not merely being contracted to produce culturally foreign content; they are exercising their creative freedom to voluntarily produce works that align with the aesthetic and thematic norms of the global centers of power. This phenomenon demonstrates the efficacy of cultural hegemony, where the dominant ideologies of the metropole are so thoroughly internalized that they are reproduced willingly, without direct coercion. The "intimacy and individualization" that Ruffino (2013) identifies as a hallmark of indie development appears, in this context, to be an intimacy with the cultural products of the center, which inspired these developers, rather than with their own local heritage. This suggests that for many peripheral creators, the imaginative landscape itself has been shaped by the media they consumed, which overwhelmingly originated from the global North. True independence, therefore, is not just a matter of securing funding or owning one's IP; it requires a conscious decolonization of the creative process itself.

Table 2 summarizes the analysis of the 28 games.

Table 2. Analysis of Cultural Content in Chilean Independent Games (2014-2024)

Company	Main Language	Game	Year	Publisher	Publisher Origin	IP Status	Cultural Content Classification
Abstract Digital	English	Tormented Souls	2021	PQube	UK	Original	Grobalization
ACE TEAM	English	Abyss Odyssey	2014	Atlus/Sega	USA/Japan	Original	Superficial Glocalization
ACE TEAM	English	The Deadly Tower of Monsters	2016	Atlus/Sega	USA/Japan	Original	Grobalization
ACE TEAM	English	Rock of Ages II	2017	Atlus/Sega	USA/Japan	Original	Grobalization
ACE TEAM	English	Sol Seraph	2019	Atlus/Sega	USA/Japan	Original	Grobalization
ACE TEAM	English	Rock of Ages III	2020	Maximum Entertainment / 3goo	Sweden/ Japan	Original	Crobalization
ACE TEAM	English	The Eternal Cylinder	2022	Good Shepherd Entertainment	The Netherlands	Original	Grobalization
ACE TEAM	English	Clash: Artifacts of Chaos	2023	Nacon	France	Original	Grobalization
AONE GAMES	English	Omen of Sorrow	2023	East Asia Soft Limited	China	Original	Grobalization
Cloud Creatures	English	Chicken Go	2020	Self-published	Chile	Original	Grobalization
Gudhar	English	Bee Careful	2022	Self-published	Chile	Original	Grobalization
Gudhar	English	Cat's Planet: Inti's Call	2023	Self-published	Chile	Original	Superficial Glocalization
Iguana Bee	English	MonsterBag	2015	Self-published	Chile	Original	Grobalization
Iguana Bee	English	HeadSnatchers	2019	Iceberg Interactive	The Netherlands	Original	Superficial Glocalization
Iguana Bee	English	GI JOE Operation Blackout	2020	Game Mill Entertainment	USA	External	Grobalization
Iguana Bee	English	World Series Baseball	2022	Game Mill Entertainment	USA	External	Grobalization
Iguana Bee	English	Skull Island Rise of Kong	2023	Game Mill Entertainment	USA	External	Grobalization
Iguana Bee	English	L.O.L. Surprise! Roller Dreams	2023	Nighthawk Interactive	USA	External	Grobalization
Iguana Bee	English	What Lies in the Multiverse	2023	Untold Tales/ Doyoyo Games	Poland/ China	Original	Grobalization
Newvicon	Spanish	Locuras en el Bananverso	2024	Self-published	Chile	Original	Thematic Glocalization (LatAm)

Company	Main Language	Game	Year	Publisher	Publisher Origin	IP Status	Cultural Content Classification
Niebla Games	English	Causa: Voices of the Dusk	2021	Self-published	Chile	Original	Grobalization
Niebla Games	English	Cuddle Quest	2024	Self-published	Chile	Original	Grobalization
Octeto Studio	English	Cyber Ops	2020	Games Operators	Poland	Original	Grobalization
Octeto Studio	English	Wings for Hire	2024	PQube	UK	Original	Grobalization
Ruken Games	English	Dandi's World	2022	Self-published	Chile	Original	Superficial Glocalization
Smarto Club	English	Teacup	2021	Whitethorn Games	USA	Original	Grobalization
Tiny Bytes	English	Massive Warfare: Aftermath	2018	Self-published	Chile	Original	Superficial Glocalization
Ulpo Media	English	Pocket Cute Cats	2022	Mouse Trapp Games	Poland	Original	Grobalization

Source: Own elaboration.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The analysis of 28 games from 11 VG Chile member studios confirms the central thesis that the Chilean independent video game industry operates as a peripheral creative sector, shaped by the dynamics of cultural dependency. The answer to the primary research question —How many Chilean games can be understood as examples of substantive (thematic), superficial (aesthetic) and/or formal mechanical glocalization?— is stark: only one game demonstrates Thematic Glocalization oriented towards Latin American identity, and even these thematic references may be questioned. And five demonstrate different levels of Superficial Glozalization.

The overwhelming majority of titles (22 out of 28) align with a model of Global Homogenization, adopting the themes, aesthetics, and genres of the industry's hegemonic centers. This finding strongly supports the conclusions of Baeza-González (2021), reinforcing the view that Chilean developers largely adapt to global market trends rather than expressing a distinct national culture.

It's worth noting that many of these games prominently feature elements from other cultures as part of their main theme or foreground aesthetic. For example, *HeadSnatchers* is presented as a Japanese contest game, and *Wings for Hire* is a JRPG (Japanese RPG). *The Deadly Tower of Monsters* requires the player to ascend a monster-filled tower, reminiscent of 1950s US B horror movies. Additionally, both *Rock of Ages* games involve players competing against figures from global history and various global art movements.

The study's key contribution lies in its application of a postcolonial framework to interpret these findings. The high prevalence of original IP creation alongside a

low incidence of local content reveals a form of cultural dependency that is more profound than simple economic "work for hire." It suggests an internalization of the cultural norms of the centers of power, where creative agency is exercised in service of mimicry. Returning to Ruffino's (2013) three aspects of independence, the Chilean case presents a complex picture:

1. Freedom as political independence: There is little evidence of political or cultural emancipation. Instead, developers appear to pursue economic emancipation by aligning with the cultural and market logic of the centers of power.
2. Accessible technology: This has clearly been a catalyst for the industry's existence, as argued by Frasca (2024). However, this study demonstrates that technological access does not equate to cultural autonomy. State support has also been a crucial factor, but it primarily facilitates entry into the existing global market rather than fostering an alternative, locally-focused ecosystem.
3. Intimacy and individualization: While this research cannot measure the subjective passion of developers, the content of their games suggests an intimate creative relationship with the international media that inspired them. This reflects a passion for the medium as defined by the global centers, a phenomenon well-documented in studies of creative labor (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008; O'Donnell, 2014).

This study is subject to limitations. Its corpus is drawn only from members of VG Chile and may not be representative of the entire, more fragmented national scene. Future research could expand this analysis to include non-affiliated developers or conduct ethnographic studies to explore the motivations and perspectives of the creators themselves. Nonetheless, the evidence presented here, supported by the work of previous scholars, strongly indicates that for peripheral creative industries like Chile's, true "independence" remains a complex and elusive goal. It is not merely an economic or technological state but requires a conscious and challenging act of cultural decolonization in a global market where conformity is often the most viable path to survival.

José Agustín Donoso-Munita. PhD(c) at University of La Sabana (Colombia) from 2022, where he started studying video games. Professor at the Universisity of the Andes (Chile) from 2013. Where he teaches audiovisual courses and studies Transmedia Narratives, Film, TV and Videogames. In 2017 he published "Transmedial Transduction in the Spider-Verse" in the journal *Palabra Clave* (10.5294/pacla.2017.20.3.8) in 2025 he published two book chapters on film and TV analysis. He is also a documentary filmmaker and editor, he has published 2 documentaries on Chilean Cable TV, also one on Chicago on Screen Film Festival in 2018, and worked as an editor for 2 documentaries, one for a filmmaker based in Chicago and the other for a filmmaker based in Washington DC. He is

currently working as an editor in a new film on migrants strategies to confront the Trump administration in Chicago. ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4404-6727

Pablo Quiñonero-Pertusa. PhD in Communication and assistant professor at the School of Communication, University of the Andes (Chile). He has previously taught at the International University of La Rioja (UNIR), where he lectured on music education and didactics. He obtained his PhD in Communication from the University of Navarra. His scholarly work addresses the relationship between musical elements and narrative construction in audiovisual media. He has published about this topic in specialized journals. Currently he teaches Screenwriting, Introduction to Audiovisual Communication, Storytelling and Creative Writing. ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7351-5844

References

Anthropy, Anna (2012). *Rise of the videogame zinesters: How freaks, normals, amateurs, artists, dreamers, drop-outs, queers, housewives, and people like you are taking back an art form*. Seven Stories Press.

Ashcroft, Bil; Griffiths, Gareth, and Tiffin, Helen (2006). *The post-colonial studies reader* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Austral Games (2025). *Mission, vision*. Austral Games. https://australgames.com/

Baeza-González, Sebastián (2021). Video games development in the periphery: Cultural dependency? *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, *103*(1), 39-54. https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.2021.1894077

BCS Studios (2025). *Explora*. BCS Studios. https://bcs-studios.com/explora/

Bhaduri, Saugata (2008). *Negotiating 'glocalization': Views from language, literature and culture studies*. Anthem Press.

Biblioteca Nacional de Chile (2024). *Brigadas Ramona Parra (BRP)*. Memoria chilena. https://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-100581.html

Brand, Sven von and Baeza-González, Sebastián (2024). Estrategias e impactos en la colaboración público-privada: Videojuegos en Chile. In Ruth Contreras Espinosa, José Luis Eguia-Gómez (Eds). *Videojuegos en Iberoamérica* (pp. 97-110). InCom-UAB Publicacions. Institut de la Comunicació, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

Chen, Sande (2017, August). *A Brief History of Game Jams*. Game Developer. https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/a-brief-history-of-game-jams

Consalvo, Mia (2006). Console video games and global corporations. *New Media & Society*, *8*(1), 117-137. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444806059921

Eder, Jakob (2019). Innovation in the periphery: A critical survey and research agenda. *International Regional Science Review*, *42*(2), 119-146. https://doi.org/10.1177/0160017618764279

Eko Wardani, Nugraheni and Widyahening, Christiana Evy T. (2020). Hybridity, mimicry and ambivalence of female characters in Indonesia: A study from post-colonial novels. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*. https://www.ijicc.net/images/vol12/iss1/12143_Wardani_2020_E_R.pdf

Fathi, Soroush and Dastoori, Azam (2014). Investigating the impact of women's so-

cial base on their political participation: A case study on women in Tehran District 2 (Shahrara). *Iranian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research UCT*. http://UC-Tjournals.com

Foulcher, Keith and Day, Tony (2002). *Clearing a space: Postcolonial readings of modern Indonesian literature*. KITLV Press.

Frasca, Gonzalo (2024). Prólogo. In Ruth Contreras Espinosa and José Luis Eguia-Gómez, (Eds). *Videojuegos en Iberoamérica* (pp. 5-8). InCom-UAB Publicacions. Institut de la Comunicació, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

Gikandi, Simon (1996). *Maps of englishness: Writing identity in the culture of colonialism* (1st ed.). Columbia University Press.

González, José (2017, August 2). *Game development in Latin America - A research*. Game Developer. https://www.gamedeveloper.com/business/game-development-in-latin-america---a-research

Gowariker, Ashutosh (2001). *Lagaan* [Film]. Columbia Pictures.

Graffenberger, Martin and Vonnahme, Lukas (2019). Questioning the "periphery label" in economic geography: Entrepreneurial Action and Innovation in South Estonia. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, *18*(2), 529-550. https://doi.org/10.14288/acme.v18i2.1557

Guevara-Villalobos, Orlando (2021). Playful peripheries: The consolidation of independent game production in Latin America. In Paolo Ruffino (Ed.), *Independent videogames. Cultures, networks, techniques and politics* (pp. 220-236). Routledge.

Isaksen, Arne and Sæther, Bjørnar (2015). Innovation in small regions. *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift - Norwegian Journal of Geography*, *69*(2), 65-66. https://doi.org/10.1080/00291951.2015.1011685

Jahn-Sudmann, Andreas (2008). Innovation NOT Opposition: The logic of distinction of independent games. *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, *2*(1), 5-10. https://doi.org/10.7557/23.5967

Johns, Jennifer (2006). Video games production networks: Value capture, power relations and embeddedness. *Journal of Economic Geography*, *6*(2), 151-180. https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbi001

Kline, Stephen; Dyer-Witheford, Nick and Peuter, Greig de (2003). *Digital play: The interaction of technology, culture and markets*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Kraidy, Marwan M. (2005). *Hybridity, or the cultural logic of globalization*. Temple University Press.

Lipkin, Nadav (2013). Examining Indie's Independence: The meaning of 'Indie' games, the politics of production, and mainstream cooptation. *Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association, 7*(11), 8-24. http://loading.gamestudies.ca

Loomba, Ania (2005). *Colonialism / Postcolonialism* (2nd edition). Routledge.

Marini, Ruy Mauro (1991). *Dialéctica de la dependencia* (11th ed.). Ediciones Era.

Martin, Chase Bowen and Deuze, Mark (2009). The independent production of culture: A digital games case study. *Games and Culture*, *4*(3), 276-295. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009339732

Mukherjee, Souvik (2017). *Videogames and postcolonialism. Empire plays back*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Nayar, Pramod K. (2010). *An introduction to new media and cybercultures*. Wiley.

Parker, Felan (2014, January 1). Indie game studies year eleven. *Digital Games Research Association Conference*, *7*. https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2013i1.683

Pedercini, Paolo (2012, October). *Towards Independence - Indiecade 2012*. Molleindustria. https://www.molleindustria.org/blog/toward-independence-indiecade-2012-microtalk/

Penix-Tadsen, Phillip (2017). *Cultural code: Videogames and Latin America*. The MIT

Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/10350.001.0001

Potter, Rob (2001). Geography and development: 'Core and Periphery'? *Area*, *33*(4), 422-427. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20004183

Ritzer, George (2004). *The globalization of nothing*. Pine Forge Press.

Robertson, Roland (1995). Glocalization: Time-space and homogeneity-heterogeneity. In Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (Eds.), *Global modernities* (pp. 25-54). Sage.

Robinson, William I. (2004). *A theory of global capitalism: Production, class, and state in a transnational world*. The John Hopkins University Press.

Roudometof, Victor (2016). *Glocalization. A critical introduction*. Routledge.

Ruffino, Paolo (2013). Narratives of independent production in video game culture. *The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association, 7*(11), 106-121. http://loading.gamestudies.ca

Ruffino, Paolo (2021). *Independent videogames. Culture, networks, techniques and politics*. Routledge.

Sandovar, Alyea (2017). Chapter 9. Going Indie. Methods for understanding Indie production. In Petri Lankoski and Jussi Holopaines (Eds.). *Game design research. An introduction to theory & practice* (pp. 171-197). Carnegie Mellon University: ETC Press.

Schuerkens, Ulrike (2003). Social transformations between global forces and local lifeworlds: Introduction. *Current Sociology*, *51*(3-4), 195-208. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392103051003003

Shaw, Adrienne (2015). *Gaming at the edge: Sexuality and gender at the margins of gamer culture*. University of Minnesota Press.

Simon, Bart (2013). Indie Eh? Some kind of Game Studies. *The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association, 7*(11), 1-7. http://loading.gamestudies.ca

The Chronicle (2025, May 3). *Grand theft auto VI release postponed to May 2026*. The Chronicle. https://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/breaking-news/grand-theft-auto-vi-release-postponed-to-may-2026/news-story/23682a8d4833acef84162224523c6fca?amp&nk=9743b8e12cd604bccc9df20b8277e95f-1747768480

Turner, Bryan S. (2003). McDonaldization. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *47*(2), 137-153. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764203256180

Ubisoft Montreal (2012). *Assassins Creed III*. Ubisoft.

VG Chile (2025). *Asociación Gremial Chilena de Desarrolladores de Videojuegos*. VG Chile. https://videogameschile.com/home/

Xhardez, Verónica (2012). *El trabajo en juego. Trabajo "creativo" y organización productiva en la industria cultural de videojuegos: Implicaciones socio-económicas (Argentina, 2009-2011)*. Doctorado en Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de Buenos Aires. Buenos Aires.

Zimmerman, Eric (2002). Do independent games exist? In Lucien King (Ed.). *Game on: The history and culture of videogames (*pp. 120-129). Laurence King Publishing.

Tripodos, number 59 | 2026 | 115-133
ISSN: 1138-3305

Received: 04-06-25
Accepted: 22-12-25
OnlineFirst: 28-04-26
Final publication: 01-06-26

Immersive Indies: On Immersive Strategies in Independent Games for Virtual Reality (VR)

Michael Walter
United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) (Al Ain, United Arab Emirates)

Since gaining popularity in the early to mid–2000s, indie video games have been extensively researched. Studies have had to keep abreast of the rapidly developing video gaming industry, which the indie sector is helping to inform. Few studies, however, analyse how the indie game sector compares in virtual reality (VR), as an emerging and immersive medium. The relatively novel VR sector lends itself to the experimental nature of indie development, particularly as the mainstream sector has had little influence in VR, and gaming conventions have yet to be established. In this article I analyse how indie games in VR are informing immersive experiences for the player. More specifically, I argue that the lack of mainstream pressure in VR, and reluctance to fully embrace the physicality of the medium, enables indie developers to lead in immersive VR gaming. Analysis of my own autoethnographic experience of prominent contemporary indie games for VR, framed by the Player Immersive Experience (PIE) model (Walter, 2025), demonstrates how the implementation of a 'full' virtual body, and player agency through freedom of movement, are used both

Desde que ganaron popularidad a principios y mediados de la década de 2000, los videojuegos independientes han sido objeto de una extensa investigación, y los estudios han tenido que mantenerse al tanto de la rápida evolución de la industria, en la que el sector independiente está contribuyendo significativamente. Sin embargo, pocos estudios analizan cómo se compara el sector de los juegos independientes en la realidad virtual (RV), un medio emergente e inmersivo. El sector de la RV, relativamente novedoso, se presta a la naturaleza experimental del desarrollo independiente, particularmente porque el sector principal ha tenido poca influencia en la RV y las convenciones de juego aún no se han establecido. En este artículo, analizo cómo los juegos independientes en RV están configurando las experiencias inmersivas para el jugador. Más específicamente, sostengo que la falta de presión del mercado principal en la RV, así como la reticencia a abrazar plenamente la corporalidad del medio, permiten a los desarrolladores independientes liderar en los juegos inmersivos de RV. El análisis de mi propia experiencia autoetnográfica con destacados juegos

Doi.org/10.51698/tripodos.2026.59.07

to affect gameplay systems and to elicit a heightened sense of immersion in VR video gaming experiences.

Keywords: *indie video game, virtual reality (VR), immersion, digital embodiment.*

independientes contemporáneos para RV, enmarcado a través del modelo de Experiencia Inmersiva del Jugador (PIE) (Walter, 2025), demuestra cómo la implementación de un cuerpo virtual 'completo' y la agencia del jugador a través de la libertad de movimiento se utilizan tanto para afectar los sistemas de juego como para provocar una mayor sensación de inmersión en las experiencias de videojuegos de RV.

Palabras clave: *videojuego independiente, realidad virtual (RV), inmersión, encarnación digital.*

Independent —or indie— video games started gaining popularity in the early to mid–2000s, and scholars have studied, among other aspects, their production (Ruffino, 2013), their characteristics, meaning and cultural significance (Lipkin, 2013; Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016; Pereira, 2021), their stylistic elements (Juul, 2014; 2019), and their challenges in the dynamic gaming landscape (Crogan, 2018). These discussions seem increasingly relevant as the indie sector appeals to more players, leading to a market share of 48 % of game revenue on Steam in 2024 (Video Game Insights, 2024). Recent successes include *Palworld* (2024), selling over 30 million units (Statista, 2025) and *Lethal Company* (2023), with over 14 million units sold on Steam alone (Video Game Insights, 2024). The capacity for indie developers to create larger games, with more complex worlds and systems that retain massive player bases is increasingly resemblant to that of mainstream video games, which has begun to blur the lines between the two sectors. The commercial and critical success of *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023) illustrates this complexity. As a self-published game initially releasing in early-access (traits of independent games) yet possessing many trademarks of mainstream or 'AAA' games, such as a larger development team, the use of motion capture and an expansive world and narrative, it became the first game to win all five major 'game of the year' awards (Serin, 2024). It is clear that as the indie game sector exerts its ability to provide full, high quality gaming experiences that appeal to millions of players —studies need to keep abreast of how indie games are informing the industry.

However, very few studies have examined how indie video games compare in the realm of virtual reality (VR), as an emerging medium. Pawel Grabarczyk (2020) highlights how discourse surrounding indie games and VR may seem at odds. On one hand, dialogue of VR suggests a kind of "techno fetishism",

involving discussions around ever increasing "resolutions, degrees of field of view" and "eye-tracking" (Grabarczyk, 2020). While indie games, on the other hand, prioritise *authenticity* and *honesty* and exhibit an "anti-industrial attitude", pushing back against the idea that "…video games through technological progress are moving on a linear path towards realism" (Juul, 2014). This attitude is referred to as the "independent spirit" and is central to indie game production (Grabarczyk, 2020). Notably, as Pawel Grabarczyk (2020) rightly points out, VR games necessitate a certain level of graphical and performance fidelity to be playable, and as not to cause motion sickness. Nonetheless, the majority of VR only video games offered on Steam are indie games, which at the time of writing, is 52 %[1]. Of the top five best-selling VR games on Steam, listed here in order of most revenue: *Beat Saber* (2019), *Half-Life: Alyx* (2020), *Blade & Sorcery* (2024), *Gorilla Tag* (2023), *Vtol VR* (2017), *Half-Life: Alyx* (2020) is the only non-indie VR video game.

Pawel Grabarczyk (2020) attributes the high number of indie VR games to three key reasons. Firstly, for *practical reasons*; as competition for indie games increased, VR has become a new market space for developers to differentiate themselves, particularly as VR technology and development tools have become readily more available (Grabarczyk, 2020). Secondly, *independent spirit and style*; though the indie spirit may seem philosophically opposed to the technologically concerned aspects for VR, as mentioned above, indie games are often "heralded as innovative, fresh and experimentative", all of which are expected in VR as a novel medium (Grabarczyk, 2020). Furthermore, the independent style (discussed further below) is continuously changing, having seemingly adopted "low polygonal untextured graphics" which suits development of VR games, particularly with the popularity of less powerful VR headsets such as the Oculus Quest (Grabarczyk, 2020). Thirdly, *the lack of mainstream/AAA video games in VR*; *Half-Life: Alyx* (2020) is considered to be the only genuine AAA video game for VR (Carter and Egliston, 2025). However, I would also include *Horizon Call of the Mountain* (2023), as a AAA game built exclusively for VR. Since major video game companies have not invested heavily into VR, many of the big-budget games available for VR are in fact *ports* from traditional platforms —which uniquely positions the indie sector in VR to "become the new mainstream as they are the pioneers of the new technology" (Grabarczyk, 2020).

Moreover, VR has been suggested to offer unparalleled immersion by adding further dimensions or "additional layer[s]" to the video gaming experience, particularly by integrating the player's physical movement into the virtual world (Bender and Broderick, 2021). Tracking technology is used to track the VR user's

1 Following Pawel Grabarczyk (2020), this percentage was calculated by assessing the frequency of games tagged as "indie" and "VR" on Steam (the largest digital distribution platform for PC). Notably, it has decreased in comparison to Pawel Grabarczyk's (2020) 67 %. This may be because players and developers may not find it necessary to tag a game as indie on steam for the VR market, as there are no real alternatives.

movements and their relation to the world around them, to simulate into a VE. Thus, VR affords a more natural 'embodied' mode of interacting in the digital world, which makes it appealing to video games. However, as an emerging medium, the extent to which video game developers embrace the immersive affordances of VR varies extensively. For example, more mainstream games like *Half-Life: Alyx* (2020) and *Horizon Call of the Mountain* (2023) do not implement a full virtual body for the player, while in indie games such as *Blade & Sorcery* (2024) and *Bonelab* (2022), the player is 'fully embodied' in' the playable character. This lack of consensus in game design can be found in many aspects of video games in VR, as developers consider the various challenges brought by the physical nature of the medium, and the industry continues to establish proven formulas.

Natural movement in VR is another example that remains one of the medium's most prominent challenges, as one is limited by physical space to move in large VEs (Nilsson *et al.,* 2018). The manner in which VR game developers implement player movement, such as locomotion, thus becomes critical, as it can be a major cause of simulation sickness (Grabarczyk, 2020) or cause unintended positional drift (UPD), in which the player is unaware of any unintentional changes in their physical position —which could result in collision into physical objects around their play space (Lim *et al*., 2026)[2]. Because of this, mainstream-leaning VR games tend to restrict player movement, limiting whether, or how, they can run or jump in the virtual world. This is arguably to safeguard players who may be new to VR (a relatively novel medium), and to avoid their feeling nauseated or physically hurt. However, limiting player movement in this way (which are options expected in most traditional games), can feel like restricting the player's agency, and may feel like a step backwards in what is expected of contemporary immersive gaming experiences. These challenges, however, can be fertile ground for indie developers, who can be more experimental and embrace more of the affordances of VR. In contemporary indie VR games, such as *Blade & Sorcery* (2024)*, Bonelab* (2022), *Contractors Showdown: Exfilzone* (2024) and *Into The Radius 2* (2024), for example, the developers seem more willing to experiment with player comfort or convenience, in favour of maximising immersion —which more profoundly demonstrates the capacity of VR as a platform for gaming.

In this study, I examine how the indie game sector has informed immersive experiences in VR. More specifically, I contend that due to the lack of mainstream alternatives, indie developers have creatively pushed the boundaries of immersive gaming experiences, particularly in regards of digital embodiment and gameplay mechanics. In order to explore the nature of immersion in VR video games, I employ the Player's Immersive Experience (PIE) model (Walter, 2025) as a framework. Analysing my autoethnographic experience of the above

2 Locomotion refers to the various methods to virtually walk in a VE. As opposed to teleporting around a virtual space, users in VR may have the *locomotive* options to move forward in space by swinging their arms to simulate walking, or to use the joystick on their controller for steering locomotion —similar to traditional flatscreen games.

contemporary indie VR games, I focus on 'ludological immersive strategies' to examine how they are innovating gameplay in VR, and 'bodily immersive strategies' as VR fundamentally brings more of the player *into* virtual worlds through digital embodiment. It is necessary to first establish what is meant by 'indie', for the purposes of this study, after which I define the concept of 'immersion' as it pertains here, and its context within VR video games.

DEFINING 'INDIE' (AND MAINSTREAM OR AAA) VIDEO GAMES

A consensus definition for 'independent' or 'indie' video games remains elusive (Pereira, 2021). Defining the concept(s) means considering various aspects of video games, from their history, development cycle, funding, publishing, visual and mechanical design, audiences, and game culture (Simon, 2013). At their core, indie games oppose or diverge from mainstream or AAA (also known as triple-A) video games —which are developed and published by larger companies/ conglomerates, such as Sony Interactive Entertainment, Microsoft or Electronic Arts (EA), which have significantly higher budgets and larger development teams. Nadav Lipkin (2013) describes the development of mainstream video games as "corporate in nature and capitalist in ethos. While not universally fairly, the mainstream is characterized as emphasizing profit and popularity over creativity and artistry". This mainstream prioritisation of profit can be seen in their monetisation practices, such as their incorporation of 'loot boxes' or 'microtransactions' which are potentially "financially and psychologically exploit[ive]" to players (King and Delfabbro, 2018). Indie games, on the other hand, stand in "opposition to the mainstream culture, to the corporate game industry, to its work practices, to its focus on profit over innovation, and to its supposed creative blandness and artistic impersonality" (Pereira, 2021).

This 'opposition' has manifested in the visual design of indie games, particularly post 2004, which embraced a certain graphical look resemblant of older or simpler games. Jesper Juul (2014; 2019) refers to this as the "independent style", which "…uses contemporary technology to emulate low-tech and usually "cheap" graphical materials and visual styles…". While the cheaper look of some indie games is at least in part due to the high cost of development tools (Lipkin, 2013), Juul (2014) argues that the *independent style* refers to games intentionally developed with a simplistic design in favour of *authenticity*. However, as Nadav Lipkin (2013) notes, mainstream developers have adopted the independent style in certain games, and indie developers have in-turn developed games with the technological and graphical prowess of AAA games, "mak[ing] it harder to evaluate a game's "indie-ness" by its appearance".

For the purpose of this paper, I will employ Maria Garda and Pawel Grabarczyk's (2016) model in reference to the meaning of 'independent' and 'indie' video games, as they differentiate between the two terms. Firstly, independent games are understood as having at least one of three types of independence: *Financial independence*, in which the developer self-funds their own game; *Creative independence,* in which developers have creative freedom to develop a game

as they please without external pressures; *Publishing independence,* in which developers are also the publishers (at least upon the initial release) of the game (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016).

Secondly, 'indie' should not be understood as an acronym of the 'independent', following Maria Garda and Pawel Grabarczyk (2016) (despite the term's etymology, as they point out), but rather as reference to "contingent properties" or "indie markers" to further categorise a type of independent game. These indie markers include an 'experimental nature', 'small budget and low price', 'retro style', 'small team' and 'indie mindset' to name a few (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016). These identifiable traits are ever changing, as Leônidas Pereira (2021) argues, and can be used to identify the 'indieness' of a given game.

DEFINING IMMERSION (AND ITS CONTEXT WITHIN VR)

Video game developers posit immersion as the central purpose for playing video games (Dansky, 2021). Scholars have thus studied the phenomenon since the emergence of game studies as a field. However, since the experience of immersion is multidimensional, as video games are multifaceted and ever developing, the meaning around the concept, its constitution, and how to consider the experience is still being informed (Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005; Calleja, 2011; Therrien, 2014; Nilsson *et al.,* 2016; Walter, 2025). Janet Murray's (2017) frequently referenced description of immersion offers a foundational understanding of the experience:

> [As] a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water [...] [immersion is] the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality [...] that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus. We enjoy the movement out of our familiar world, the feeling of alertness that comes from being in this new place, and the delight that comes from learning to move in it. [...] [I]n a participatory medium, immersion implies learning to swim, to do the things that the new environment makes possible.

In other words, immersion refers to the *transportation* of one's *presence* to a virtual environment (VE). Presence (short for telepresence) here, refers to the subjective experience of one's consciousness or perception *in* a VE (such as a video game), to such an extent, that one fails to notice or acknowledge the mediation that is taking place (Slater and Wilbur, 1997; The International Society for Presence Research, n.d.). The more the medium affects one's senses and allows one to interact within the VE, the more immersive the medium, and thus, the higher or more convincing the sense of presence it can elicit.

Video games employ a variety of methods to immerse players, for example, through use of audio/visual fidelity, narrative, gameplay mechanics, characters, music or challenges. Scholars have thus framed immersion as a phenomenon experienced through multiple dimensions (Ermi and Mäyrä's, 2005) sensory, challenge-based and imaginative immersion (SCI) model, and Calleja's (2011) Player Involvement model). VR further adds dimensions to the immersive

gaming experience by perceptually blocking out external distractions and filling the player's field of vision with a VE in which they can interact using physical, bodily motion. Players are thus 'more convincingly' present *in* the game. The *Player's Immersive Experience* (PIE) model offers a revised framework of immersion as experienced in VR video games particularly and will be employed in this paper (Walter, 2025). Through the PIE model, immersion in VR can be accounted for and understood through the experience of eight dimensions or "immersive strategies", namely: sensory immersive strategies; bodily immersive strategies; game feel, affective, and empathetic immersive strategies; world-building immersive strategies; narrative immersive strategies; ludological immersive strategies; social immersive strategies and immersion disruption (Walter, 2025). These immersive dimensions are integrated and not experienced in isolation from each other. Nor are they experienced equally during gameplay, as some video games incorporate more immersive strategies than others (Walter, 2025).

Due to the scope of this paper, I limit my analysis to *bodily immersive strategies* and *ludological immersive strategies,* following the PIE model (Walter, 2025). Considering *bodily immersive strategies* is particularly relevant given VR's foundational premise of incorporating physical interaction within virtual environments (Lanier, 2017). Bodily immersive strategies refer to the extent to which a player feels 'embodied' *as* a video game character during gameplay (Walter, 2025). This digital embodiment in video games is experienced at a phenomenological level, not implied fictionally or imaginarily, but rather "as a composite of flesh and technology, objectively existing within synthetic space" (Klevjer, 2012). VR arguably heightens the experience of digital embodiment, affording the user to interact more naturally with the virtual world from the perspective of the virtual body as if it were their own. Kilteni *et al*. (2012) refer to this experience as the *sense of embodiment* (SoE), which they define as "the sense that emerges when [a virtual body's] properties are processed as if they were the properties of one's own biological body". These properties include: the *sense of self-location* (the feeling of being inside a body); the *sense of agency* (having total control over the body); and the *sense of body ownership* (the feeling that one's sensations are occurring from the virtual body) (Kilteni *et al.,* 2012). While the SoE in VR can heighten the player's level of immersion, it can also profoundly affect gameplay experiences, as trivial systems like reloading a weapon using physical gestures become mechanics players must methodically learn (Bender and Broderick, 2021).

I also analyse *ludological immersive strategies*, following the PIE model (Walter 2025). This dimension is concerned with the gameplay and mechanical aspects of the video gaming experience. These include Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (2008) seminal *flow theory* (which considers the game's balance of challenge and progression), game progression systems, pacing and learning curves, as well as systems such as combat and health management (Walter, 2025). In other words, this dimension considers how a player is immersed by the ludic (playful) aspects of a game, and the extent to which VR attempts to elevate this immersion (Walter, 2025).

Thus, following these definitions, a clear tension emerges between the commercial safeguards of the mainstream sector and the experimental 'independent spirit' in VR video games. While AAA developers often prioritise player comfort by limiting physical agency and embodiment, the indie sector increasingly prioritises immersive strategies outlined in the PIE model to maximize immersion. This study argues that financial, creative, and publishing independence allows indie developers to treat the challenges of VR, such as 'full' digital embodiment and unrestricted locomotion, not as obstacles to be avoided, but as fertile ground for innovation to afford player experiences only possible in VR. The following analysis examines how these specific 'bodily' and 'ludological' strategies enable indie titles to pioneer a more profound sense of immersion than their mainstream counterparts.

RESEARCH METHOD

Given the phenomenologically isolated nature of the player's senses in VR, in this study I employ an autoethnographic method to examine the experience of immersion. Autoethnographies stem from ethnographies, in which researchers *immerse* themselves into particular cultural contexts and extract their informant's (or their own) *experiences* as data, making them "a popular method for researching virtual worlds and online computer games" (Brown, 2015). Autoethnographies, however, more closely consider the researcher's *own lived experiences* as data, and as in this case within a video gaming context, cyber or digital autoethnographies explore the researcher's embodied experience in virtual space (Atay, 2020). More specifically, I assume the role of a "researcher-critic", which Stuart Bender and Mick Broderick (2021) refer to as a "self-aware scholar willing to immerse themselves in the VR text under analysis and capable of reflecting on the experience they have had". These reflections of my immersive experiences will employ phenomenological description, following Stuart Bender and Mick Broderick's (2021) "VR phenomenology", which "privileges the subjective experience of the researcher-critic" as the focus of the experience. My phenomenological descriptions of immersion will be framed through the PIE model (Walter, 2025). I will be particularly concerned with the bodily and ludological immersive strategies employed in the following indie VR games: *Blade & Sorcery* (2024), *Bonelab* (2022), *Contractors Showdown: Exfilzone* (2024) and *Into The Radius 2* (2024).

These four games have been selected as prominent and contemporary examples of indie VR development, some of which are top-selling VR games on Steam. Furthermore, all four titles are first-person action/combat games, providing a direct comparison to the design choices of the few existing AAA VR games (*Half-Life: Alyx* (2020) and *Horizon Call of the Mountain* (2023)), both of which are of the same genre. Each title was played extensively to account for their various sandbox, survival, or multiplayer designs. The narrative campaigns for *Bonelab* (2022) and *Blade & Sorcery* (2024) were fully completed both prior to and repeated during the course of this study.

An autoethnographic approach allows for more prolonged exposure within the video games in question, facilitating a more in-depth account of one's immersive experiences in the game —which is necessary, considering the phenomenon's complexity. Paradoxically, the subjective feelings of immersion and presence involve a lack of awareness of the technology and mediated process. Thus, to assist in my analysis and to employ the observational tool of reflexivity, I recorded my gameplay sessions of each game using Open Broadcaster Software (OBS). These recordings served to provide references and examples for my descriptions and ensured that 'moments' of immersion could be analysed retrospectively without being lost to the mediated experience itself.

ANALYSING BODILY AND LUDOLOGICAL IMMERSIVE STRATEGIES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIE VR GAMES

As VR video game development continues to mature, features and game designs will become more refined. At present, however, VR games (even of similar design or genre) have inconsistent approaches to similar aspects. As highlighted above, this lack of unanimity in game design persists in the level of embodiment incorporated in VR video games. Integrating a 'full' virtual body in a VR game is challenging. A typical consumer headset has tracking sensors on the head-mounted display (HMD) and on the controllers and so it can only *predict* the movements and location of the rest of the user's body as they move. If the virtual body is portrayed incorrectly, it can disrupt immersion, presence, the SoE or nauseate the player (Eubanks *et al.,* 2020). For this reason, Valve settled on 'floating hands' (Image 01) in *Half-Life: Alyx* (2020), according to Design Manager Robin Walker (Reeves, 2020). While the virtual body in *Half-Life: Alyx* is accounted for, to an extent, using sounds and while it can be interacted with (to heal for example) (Walter, 2025), the lack of a '*full*' virtual body can create ludological limitations that could affect immersion, as I argue below.

Image 1. *'Floating hands'*

Source: *Half-Life: Alyx* (2020), screenshot by author.

By contrast, in many contemporary indie games, including all four I analyse here, the player inhabits a 'full' virtual body. As I look down, I can see the rest of my virtual body (Image 02). While I may not be able to move my entire virtual body independently, as I can my hands or head (since these are tracked), the body responds intuitively to my overall movements. As I walk using steering locomotion, my VR legs simulate a walking motion. Seeing my virtual legs grappling against the wall as I look down while climbing in *Bonelab* (2022) provides further visual feedback for my actions. The presence of this virtual body only heightens the SoE *in* the game, as it reinforces my *senses of self-location, agency and body ownership* (Kilteni *et al.,* 2012; Eubanks *et al.,* 2020). While technical glitches caused by inhabiting a 'full' virtual body may occasionally occur (such as misrepresenting the current position or posture of my *physical* body), the level of immersion elicited from the inclusion of a full virtual body more often outweighs the disruption it can cause.

Image 2. Inhabiting a 'full' virtual body

Source: *Into The Radius 2* (2024), screenshot by author.

Perhaps more importantly, having a full virtual body in VR can also affect gameplay design and systems —areas in which indie developers seem to lead. In *Blade and Sorcery* (2024), for example, I can get shot by arrows which stick into various parts of my virtual body, and which I can then pull out. Removing arrows from my virtual body is a satisfying action that plays well into the immersion and fantasy roleplay of the game. This arguably would not work without a full virtual body. Similarly, in *Contractors Showdown: Exfilzone* (2024), I can get shot in various limbs across my body, and depending on the severity of the wound, a physical action is needed to apply the appropriate healing method. These include wrapping a bandage over the appendage, stapling the wound shut, or injecting it. These methodical, *bodily* actions are a core feature of military simulator (MilSim) shooter games such as *Escape from Tarkov* (2017), in which all actions such as movement, healing, shooting or reloading are slower and more meticulous for the sake of realism. The affordance of a full virtual body in VR facilitates this game design. To wrap a bandage around my arm in *Contractors*

Showdown: Exfilzone (2024) I must wind it around the wounded arm, with the wounded arm also instinctively assisting in the winding motion to speed the process up. This is a natural, kinaesthetic interaction that feels authentic and more immersive as it more closely aligns my physical intentions with the virtual actions in the game.

Moreover, a 'full' virtual body in VR also enables the use of diegetic menus and inventory systems, to further immerse the player in the VE by grounding functional mechanics within the virtual space. In many traditional flatscreen video games, a player may bring up their inventory by pressing a dedicated button to access a non-diegetic menu that exists outside of the game world for the player to manage. While this design has become standard in traditional flatscreen video games, VR developers are yet to establish interface and inventory system conventions (Grabarczyk, 2020; Pandey and Sorathia, 2025). In mainstream VR games such as *Half-Life: Alyx* (2020) or *Horizon Call of the Mountain* (2023), the player accesses a non-diegetic weapon wheel menu to select their weapon. While some items such as ammunition can be stored or drawn by physically reaching over shoulder, these games seemingly opt for more familiar methods used in traditional flatscreen video games. This is possibly to sustain more efficient gameplay, as the player can quickly access their desired item without fumbling. By contrast, many indie VR games, including all four indie VR games analysed here, utilise the *player's virtual body* as a diegetic interface for inventory management (Image 03). Larger weapons are stored on the player's back and can be accessed by reaching over the shoulders, while smaller weapons are kept on the hips or on the player's chest. In the MilSim VR games, like *Into The Radius 2* (2024) and *Contractors Showdown: Exfilzone* (2024), the player wears a chest rig to expand their bodily storage, allowing them to easily access more items such as flashlights or healing tools. In addition, the player wears a backpack, accessed from over the shoulder, which is used to store miscellaneous items gathered in the game. Within these backpacks the storage is managed using physical movements in free space, as opposed to a menu system.

Image 3. A quiver of arrows stored on my left hip with a sword on my right (left) and the player's inventory is managed using physical movements in a backpack system (right)

Source: *Blade & Sorcery* (2024) (left) and *Into The Radius 2* (2024) (right), screenshots by author.

Implementing diegetic inventory management systems that rely on the player's virtual body can present challenges and lead to awkward player experiences. If reaching for a weapon or item on my body without looking, for example, I may pick up the wrong item, which could be a frustrating in certain scenarios. Similarly, I may end up losing items, thinking I have stored them but have in fact dropped them without noticing. This kind of embodied, diegetic interface is also slower than traditional non-diegetic interfaces, and at times may be less convenient, as the increased effort required to use diegetic interfaces for simple tasks may inadvertently cause frustration —particularly in non-gaming VR contexts such as training applications (Dickinson *et al.,* 2021).

In VR video games, however, diegetic systems can lead to increased engagement, immersion and presence (Pandey and Sorathia, 2025). The physicality of these embodied, diegetic interfaces can be satisfactory in and of itself and can create immersive situations that are unique to VR gaming. Having to look down to my chest rig to see whether I have any grenades left or fumbling as I unintentionally grab the wrong weapon during combat can make for interesting gameplay that feels slower, yet, often more convincing than traditional flatscreen gameplay that features conventional non-diegetic interfaces and storage systems. Furthermore, managing where I store the various items on my virtual body or backpack further adds a layer of personalisation and nuance to the experience, which is not offered by traditional systems.

As shown here, it is owed to inhabiting a 'full' virtual body (which is interactable) that can heighten the SoE *in* the game. While it is useful to adopt systems and designs from traditional video games, as they have matured over decades, the SoE and physicality afforded by VR offers players unique gaming experiences that often require alternative approaches that embrace these VR features —in which indie developers are seemingly pioneering. By not incorporating a 'full' virtual body, developers risk limiting other ludological systems that can be improved in VR.

Player movement is another major challenge for VR game developers, as highlighted above. Since the player cannot physically walk, run or jump to be simulated in the game, these movements are often done using the controllers. VR games frequently offer teleporting or steering locomotive options for walking and running, while jumping is regularly performed with a button on the controller (if offered at all). While steering locomotion may afford a higher sense of presence for players (Clifton and Palmisano, 2020), experiencing one's own virtual body move in space while their physical body remains stationary can quickly become nauseating, particularly for newer VR players, as Hirobe *et al*. (2025) find. VR gamers likely need to condition themselves to this simulated movement, a process referred to in the VR community as acquiring one's 'VR legs'. This is done by initially playing VR games that require little to no virtual walking, and then gradually playing more trying games with locomotion and sprinting/jumping options.

Potentially, in efforts to avoid nausea and appeal to a wider player base, mainstream VR games like *Half-Life: Alyx* (2020) and *Horizon Call of the Mountain* (2023) severely limit the player's movement. This can dampen the sense of

agency the player has over the virtual body, which could disrupt immersion. In *Half-Life: Alyx* (2020), for example, there is no ability to sprint or jump, which can disrupt the urgency established in various game scenarios. It undermines the game's tension if I am only able to (slowly) walk around during a gun fight, or from a monster. *Horizon Call of the Mountain* (2023) limits player movement further during combat encounters. Enemy engagements in the game typically take place in some form of 'combat arena', during which the player is limited to only moving sideways, as if on an invisible rail along the outskirts of the arena, without the ability to freely move forward or backward. This is dramatically dissimilar to the traditional flatscreen *Horizon* games, in which players are free to engage the encounter as they please in the open-world. These movement limitations are designed to safeguard players from getting nauseated, while also trying to elicit immersion, but ultimately, they can limit what VR potentially offers best: the player's agency over their virtual body. It seems counterintuitive to restrict player movement on a platform that involves their body as closely to the experience as VR does. As Elena Kalina and Mina Johnson-Glenberg (2020) indicate, presence and engagement are negatively affected if player agency or *active embodiment* is lessened —even in VR.

Indie VR developers on the other hand, seem more willing to free the player to move as they like. This level of freedom is almost expected in a modern gaming experience. In indie VR games such as *Blade & Sorcery* (2024), *Bonelab* (2022), *Contractors Showdown: Exfilzone* (2024) and *Into The Radius 2* (2024), I am able to sprint (either by pressing down on the controller or by swinging my arms faster) to more quickly traverse greater distances in the game. Sprinting is also used to evade incoming attacks or find cover more quickly, which feels essential and more immersive in many encounters. The inclusion of unrestricted jumping in these games further enhances player agency by allowing for vertical exploration and additional interaction in combat. Climbing is also largely featured in games like *Blade & Sorcery* (2024) and *Bonelab* (2022), as the player is often required to climb to areas to progress. These games are entirely physics based and so the player is likely able to climb anything that could hold their body's weight (if they can grip it), as opposed to pre-defined climbing paths. If the player falls in the game, they fall at the expected speed as per the game's physics engine. Whereas in *Half-Life: Alyx* (2020) and *Horizon Call of the Mountain* (2023), the player's fall is drastically slowed down as to not discomfort them. These decisions that cater for player comfort can ultimately affect the gaming experience overall, limiting the extent to which the developers can immerse players in the game. While the appeal of VR is arguably 'unparalleled' immersion, mainstream game developers seem to artificially restrict themselves. Though the abilities to run or jump in VR can be challenging to implement, and take time to get used to, they allow the player to experience the true extent of immersion that the medium has to offer. This is best illustrated by a descriptive experience of the giant stone golem boss encounter (Image 04) at the end of the more challenging dungeons in *Blade & Sorcery* (2024).

Image 4. The giant stone golem boss encounter

Source: *Blade & Sorcery* (2024), screenshot by author.

The engagement with the giant stone golem begins with a large drop into the boss arena, and the only way to progress through the level is to defeat it. This is done by shattering the crystals on its body. These crystals can be shattered using medieval weapons or magic, all while evading the golem's own attacks and spells. During the battle I am free to move around the whole arena and engage the golem as I see fit. Some of the crystals are positioned on top of the golem, requiring the player to climb the golem itself, often while it is moving, to destroy them. While it can be bewildering to hold onto the golem as it swings around in VR, it creates a highly immersive gaming experience and plays well into the fantasy of the game. To make things more challenging, some of the golem's crystals are shielded, and require the player to first break a larger shield crystal located around in the arena, often in high-up areas. The player reaches these crystals by climbing and swinging across gaps, while evading rocks and spells being thrown by the golem. This sense of scale and verticality in the environment, and the freedom afforded to the player to traverse unrestrictedly through it, is not experienced it more mainstream VR games. Jumping down from a high ledge onto the moving golem can be a daunting, vertigo-inducing prospect for newcomers to VR, yet the immersion of the experience is arguably unmatched by mainstream games (Image 05).

Navigating this level of agency and movement in VR requires significant habituation. I found my initial experiences with this type of game design to be physically discomforting, to reiterate Hirobe *et al.* (2025). Now, having been conditioned to this type of gameplay, I find that this unrestricted movement facilitates a deeper sense of presence, making it amongst the most immersive gaming experiences available. It is owed to this level of agency, *in* an interactable 'full' virtual body, that I find I return to indie games rather than to mainstream ones in VR. While the level of detail, graphical fidelity, voice acting, animation or narrative of mainstream VR games like *Half-Life: Alyx* (2020) and *Horizon Call of the Mountain* (2023) may surpass that of indie VR games, indie developers seem more willing to accommodate experienced VR gamers to live-out their fantasies in immersive game worlds.

Image 5. Jumping down towards the giant stone golem

Source: *Blade & Sorcery* (2024), screenshot by author.

CONCLUSION

Through their ability to more freely experiment with game design, indie game developers can have transformative effects on the industry (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016). This is evident in their impact within the VR space, particularly with little competition from the mainstream sector. Indie games have become, as Pawel Grabarczyk (2020) argues, "the reference point of how a VR game looks like, and they have set the horizon of expectations for the new technology". In some ways, indie developers in VR are delivering experiences indistinguishable from mainstream games, producing games with a high graphical fidelity (illustrated by *Blade & Sorcery*) that elicit substantial levels of immersion and presence. The four indie games analysed here also do not appear to employ any form of *independent style*, following Juul (2014; 2019), as there is no mainstream to defy. Instead, they seem to prioritise immersion by affording a greater SoE and player agency with unrestricted movement. Though new players may need to habituate themselves to play these VR games, by doing so they gain access to the new immersive depths that VR has to offer. This reiterates Janet Murray's (2017 emphasis added) sentiment regarding the experience of immersion; "in a participatory medium, *immersion implies learning to swim*, to do the things that the new environment makes possible".

In this paper, I have highlighted that while much has been written on the progress and influence of the indie video game sector, very few studies have considered how indie games fare in VR as an emerging medium, a gap this study helps to address. I argued that the indie sector has pioneered in delivering what Rick Lane (2020) calls VR's "promise of unparalleled immersion", as AAA VR developers seemingly constrain themselves to cater for the mainstream. This is evident in the implementation of a 'full' virtual body and the agency elicited by the freedom of movement provided to the player, which I illustrate through the analyses of four prominent, contemporary indie games developed exclusively for

VR. Lastly, I maintained that indie VR games seem to employ these immersive strategies to influence gameplay mechanics to create unique gaming experiences only realisable in VR.

Michael Walter is a South African academic, currently lecturing in the Media & Creative Industries Department at the United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain, United Arab Emirates. He received his PhD in Digital Culture & Media from the University of Pretoria, South Africa in 2024. His thesis focused on the multidimensional experience of immersion in video games and virtual reality (VR), for which he developed the Player's Immersive Experience (PIE) Model, a framework to analyse the complex nature of the immersive experience in (VR) video games. A publication, conference presentation and book chapter, have emanated from his PhD. He completed his undergraduate and master's degrees at Nelson Mandela University in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Walter continues his research in video games and immersive media such as VR.

References

Atay, Ahmet (2020). What is cyber or digital autoethnography? *International Review of Qualitative Research 13*(3), 267-279. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940844720934373

Bender, Stuart M. and Broderick, Mick (2021). *Virtual realities: Case studies in immersion and phenomenology*. Palgrave Macmillan Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-82547-8

Brown, Ashley (2015). Awkward: The importance of reflexivity in using ethnographic methods. In Petri Lankoski and Staffan Björk (Eds.), *Game research methods: An overview* (pp. 77-92). ETC Press.

Calleja, Gordon (2011). *In-game: From immersion to incorporation*. MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/8429.001.0001

Carter, Marcus and Egliston, Ben (2025). Virtualr reality and the hardcore gamer. In Leighton Evans (Ed.), *Virtual reality gaming: Perspectives on immersion, embodiment and presence* (pp. 15-28). Emerald. https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83549-376-220251004

Clifton, Jeremy and Palmisano, Stephen (2020). Effects of steering locomotion and teleporting on cybersickness and presence in HMD-based virtual reality. *Virtual Reality*, *24*, 453-468. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10055-019-00407-8

Crogan, Patrick (2018). Indie dreams: Video games, creative economy, and the hyperindustrial epoch. *Games and Culture*, *13*(7), 671-689. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412018756708

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (2008). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. HarperCollins.

Dansky, Richard (2021). Introduction to game narrative. In Chris Bateman (Ed.), *Game writing: Narrative skills for videogames* (pp. 1-25). Bloomsbury.

Dickinson, Patrick; Cardwell, Andrew; Parke, Adrian; Gerling, Kathrin, and Murray, John (2021). Diegetic tool management

in a virtual reality training simulation. In *2021 IEEE Virtual Reality and 3D User Interfaces (VR)* (pp. 131-139). IEEE. https://doi.org/10.1109/VR50410.2021.00034

Ermi, Laura and Mäyrä, Frans (2005). Fundamental components of the gameplay experience: Analysing immersion. Proceedings of the DiGRA 2005 Conference Changing Views - Worlds in Play. https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/119/119

Eubanks, James Coleman; Moore, Alec G.; Fishwick, Paul A., and McMahan, Ryan P. (2020). The effects of body tracking fidelity on embodiment of an inverse-kinematic avatar for male participants. In *2020 IEEE International Symposium on Mixed and Augmented Reality* (ISMAR) (pp. 54-63). IEEE. https://doi.org/10.1109/ISMAR50242.2020.00025

Garda, Maria B. and Grabarczyk, Pawel (2016). Is every indie game independent? Towards the concept of independent game. *Game Studies*, *16*(1). https://gamestudies.org/1601/articles/Gardagrabarczyk/

Grabarczyk, Pawel (2020). Virtually indie: On the characteristics of independent game development for virtual reality headsets. In Paolo Ruffino (Ed.), *Independent videogames: Cultures, networks techniques and politics* (pp. 58-74). Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780367336219-5/virtually-indie-pawe%C5%82-grabarczyk

Hirobe, Daichi; Shirai, Shizuka; Orlosky, Jason; Alizadeh, Mehrasa; Kobayashi, Masato; Uranishi, Yuki; Ratsamee, Photchara, and Takemura, Haruo (2025). User-centric locomotion techniques for virtual reality games: A survey of user needs and issues. *IEEE Transactions on Games*, *17*(2), 460-473. https://doi.org/10.1109/TG.2024.3498325

Juul, Jesper (2014). High-tech low-tech authenticity: The creation of independent style at the Independent Games Festival. Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG2014). http://www.fdg2014.org/proceedings.html

Juul, Jesper (2019). *Handmade pixels: Independent video games and the quest for authenticity*. Mit Press.

Kalina, Elena and Johnson-Glenburg, Mina C. (2020). Presence and platform: Effects of embodiment comparing a 2D computer and 3D VR game. In *6th International Conference of the Immersive Learning Research Network (iLRN 2020)* (pp 31-37). https://doi.org/10.23919/iLRN47897.2020.9155160

Kilteni, Konstantina; Groten, Raphaela, and Slater, Mel (2012). The sense of embodiment in virtual reality. *Presence Teleoperators & Virtual Environments*, *21*(4), 373-387. https://doi.org/10.1162/PRES_a_0

King, Daniel L. and Delfabbro, Paul H (2019). Video game monetization (eg,'loot boxes'): A blueprint for practical social responsibility measures. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, *17*(1), 166-179. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-018-0009-3

Klevjer, Rune (2012). Enter the avatar: The phenomenology of prosthetic telepresence in computer games. In John R. Sageng, Hallvard Fossheim and Tarjei M. Larsen (Eds.), *The philosophy of computer games* (Vol. 7), (pp. 17-38). Springer.

Lane, Rick (2020). Half-Life: Alyx review – A spectacular immersive experience. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/games/2020/mar/25/half-life-alyx-review-a-spectacular-immersive-experience

Lanier, Jaron (2017). *Dawn of the new everything: Encounters with reality and virtual reality*. Henry Holt and Company.

Lim, Chae Heon; Lee, Hwanhun; Kim, Doheon; Cha, Min Chul, and Lee, Seul Chan (2026). The effects of locomotion and steering methods in virtual reality on unintended positional drift. *Applied Ergonomics*, 130, 104652. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apergo.2025.104652

Lipkin, Nadav (2013). Examining Indie's Independence: The meaning of "indie" games, the politics of production, and mainstream co-optation. *Loading...*, *7*(11), 8-24. https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/122

Murray, Janet H. (2017). *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace, updated edition*. MIT Press.

Nilsson, Niels C.; Nordahl, Rolf, and Serafin, Stefania (2016). Immersion revisited: A review of existing definitions of immersion and their relation to different theories of presence. *Human Technology 12*(2), 108-134. http://dx.doi.org/10.17011/ht/urn.201611174652

Nilsson, Niels C.; Serafin, Stefania; Steinicke, Frank, and Nordahl, Rolf (2018). Natural walking in virtual reality: A review. *Computers in Entertainment, 16*(2), 1-22. https://doi.org/10.1145/3180658

Pandey, Rishabh and Sorathia, Keyur (2025). Menu user interface design for Head-mounted display Virtual Reality: A systematic literature review. *Computers & Graphics*, *132*, 104402. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cag.2025.104402

Pereira, Leônidas S. (2021). The elusive "indieness": Measuring the defining characteristics of indie games. *Loading…, 14*(24), 48-69. https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/315

Reeves, Ben (2020, March). *Valve talks Half-Life: Alyx and why arms don't work in VR*. Gameinformer. https://www.gameinformer.com/interview/2020/03/23/valve-talks-half-life-alyx-and-why-arms-dont-work-in-vr

Ruffino, Paolo (2013). Narratives of independent production in video game culture. *Loading...*, *7*(11), 106-121. https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/120

Serin, Kaan (2024). *Baldur's Gate 3 passes Elden Ring and Breath of the Wild to become first game to win all five major GOTY awards*. *Gameradar*. https://www.gamesradar.com/baldurs-gate-3-passes-elden-ring-and-breath-of-the-wild-to-become-first-game-to-win-all-five-major-goty-awards/

Simon, Bart (2013). Indie Eh? Some Kind of Game Studies. *Loading...*, *7*(11), 1-7. https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/129

Slater, Mel and Wilbur, Sylvia (1997). A framework for immersive virtual environments (FIVE): Speculations on the role of presence in virtual environments. *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments, 6*(6), 603-616. https://doi.org/10.1162/pres.1997.6.6.603

Statista (2025). *Lifetime unit sales generated by Palworld worldwide as of February 2025*. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1447359/palworld-games-sales-worldwide/

The International Society for Presence Research (n.d.). *Presence defined*. https://ispr.info/about-presence-2/about-presence/

Therrien, Carl (2014). Immersion. In Mark Wolf and Bernard Perron (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to video game studies* (pp. 451-458). Routledge.

Video Game Insights (2024). *Global Indie Games Market Report 2024*. https://vginsights.com/assets/reports/VGI_Global_Indie_Games_Market_Report_2024.pdf

Walter, Michael (2025). The Player's Immersive Experience (PIE) Model: Framing the multidimensional concept of immersion in VR video games. In Leighton Evans (Ed.), *Virtual reality gaming: Perspectives on immersion, embodiment and presence* (pp. 43-56). Emerald. https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83549-376-220251008

LUDOGRAPHY

Baldur's Gate 3 [Video game] (2023). Larian Studios.

Beat Saber [Video game] (2019). Beat Games.

Blade & Sorcery [Video game] (2024). WarpFrog.

Bonelab [Video game] (2022). Stress Level Zero.

Contractors Showdown: Exfilzone [Video game] (2024). Caveman Studio.

Escape from Tarkov [Video game] (2017). Battlestate Games.

Gorilla Tag [Video game] (2023). Another Axiom Inc.

Half-Life: Alyx [Video game] (2020). Valve Corporation.

Horizon: Call of the Mountain [Video game] (2023). Sony Interactive Entertainment.

Into the Radius 2 [Video game] (2024). CM Games.

Lethal Company [Video game] (2023). Zeekerss.

Palworld [Video game] (2024). Pocketpair.

Vtol VR [Video game] (2017). Boundless Dynamics, LCC.

Tripodos, number 59 | 2026 | 134-150
ISSN: 1138-3305

Received: 15-06-25
Accepted: 16-03-26
OnlineFirst: 12-05-26
Final publication: 01-06-26

End of Memories: Coming-of-Age, Love, Loss, and Friendship. Ludonarrative Writing in Indie Games about Asia-Pacific

Alberto Porta Pérez
Jaume I University (Spain)

The article explores ludonarrative writing about several Asia-Pacific indie video games, focusing on titles that subvert traditional narratives to foreground experiences centred around teenage protagonists with darker or more challenging aspects. We analyse A Space for the Unbound (Mojiken Studio, 2022) (Indonesia), Last Time I Saw You (Maboroshi Artworks, 2024) (Japan), and Until Then (Polychroma Games, 2024) (Philippines). These ludofictions address adolescence, the anguish of the search for identity, and the difficulty of fitting into society, all within game worlds where reality is shaped by fantasy elements represented in pixel art aesthetics or through hand-drawn illustrations. Gameplay mechanics vary, from puzzle solving and combat to platformer-style navigation or decision-making based on visual novels. This article seeks to identify distinctive artistic styles and regional or national identities that shape their ludonarrative writing, with a particular focus on framing, playability, and identification.

Keywords: *ludonarrative, coming-of-age, teenage, indie, Asia.*

El artículo explora la escritura ludonarrativa sobre algunos videojuegos indie de Asia Pacífico, centrándose en títulos que subvierten narrativas tradicionales para potenciar experiencias centradas en protagonistas adolescentes con lados más oscuros o desafiantes. Analizamos A Space for the Unbound *(Mojiken Studio, 2022) (Indonesia),* Last Time I Saw You *(Maboroshi Artworks, 2024) (Japón) y* Until Then *(Polychroma Games, 2024) (Filipinas). Estas ludoficciones abordan la adolescencia, la angustia por la búsqueda de la identidad y la dificultad para encajar en la sociedad, todo dentro de mundos ludoficcionales donde la realidad se ve afectada por elementos de fantasía representados en una estética pixel art o a través de dibujos hechos a mano. Las mecánicas de juego varían, desde la resolución de puzles y combate hasta la navegación tipo plataformas o la toma de decisiones basada en* visual novels*. Con esta investigación buscamos identificar estilos artísticos distintivos e identidades regionales o nacionales que configuran su escritura ludonarrativa, concretamente el encuadre, la jugabilidad y la identificación.*

Palabras clave: *ludonarrativa, coming-of-age, adolescencia, indie, Asia.*

Doi.org/10.51698/tripodos.2026.59.08

It's not easy for the player to embody Atma's body on their journey of self-discovery during their high school years, all while uncovering the anxiety and depression suffered by their best friend, Raya. Nor is it easy to live as Ayumi, who experiences her first romances while coping with family problems. Or as Mark, who can not find enough reasons to turn in homework on time at a high school that makes him feel insecure day after day, unable to answer: "Who Am I?". And if navigating adolescence were not enough, these three protagonists must do so in the presence of supernatural powers, monsters, and ghosts. These three premises belong to three indie video games that explore adolescence following ludonarrative patterns that we aim to explore in this research.

The boundaries that determine where the term "indie" in the video game industry begins and ends are increasingly blurry, if they were ever clear. Game Studies has discussed this "exceptionally elusive term, as we are constantly having difficulties in explaining its meaning" (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016), generally linked to financial, creative, or editorial independence. It is also not easy to define or categorize ludofictions by region or country in an increasingly globalized and cross-border sector (Anyó, 2023). For all these reasons, we want to highlight the difficulty of video game research within a framework where genre and subgenre labels fluctuate and are sometimes contradictory.

For this research, we identified indie games by their originality and transgression against industry standards. We also looked at how their game design emphasizes "relation to essential aspects of the content, such as the main character's psychology, their relationship with the represented world and certain underlying themes" (Pérez-Latorre, 2016, p. 24). Our focus is not on market competition or resources. Instead, we are interested in indie video games that do not face self-censorship or institutional pressure, allowing them to "can therefore explore more sensitive topics such as rape, racism, incest, cancer, depression, transsexuality, etc." (Trépanier-Jobin, 2016, p. 117). Therefore, we selected our case studies by seeking titles where designers were able to express themselves and become involved on an ideological and emotional level (Pérez-Latorre, 2016).

Beyond focusing on productions from studios "without the resources of large global companies or association with major global publishers"[1] (Anyó, 2023, p. 4), we are also examining video games set in the Asia-Pacific region or which depict parts of this vast territory. Our goal is to identify distinctive artistic styles and regional or national identities that shape their ludonarrative writing. This refers to "the audiovisual construction of the resulting product", which is fundamental to video game design even though, ironically, "little attention has been paid to it from academia" (Martín-Núñez, 2021, p. 370). As Marta Martín-Núñez argues, and as we will contend in this research, "the expression of the video game lies in how it is viewed [...] beyond where it is viewed from" (Martín-Núñez, 2021, p. 370). We are investigating all of this while also considering that our case studies are appealing to a foreign and Western audience —not just as players, but also

1 All English translations are made by the author.

as researchers. This is precisely because they expose a "supposed authenticity" (Grau de Pablos, 2023, p. 6) of the local. As Tomás Grau de Pablos argues in his research on Japanese indie games, which can be extended to other Asian-Pacific nationalities, the appeal of authenticity is maintained when players are evoked with folklore, an era, or a time "that reminds them of their childhood or an idealized period of the medium" (Grau de Pablos, 2023, p. 6). Throughout the article, we will argue how our case studies not only exude a nostalgic atmosphere through various elements interwoven into the ludonarrative design but also do so through a teenage avatar that is crucial for a gameplay experience centred around coming-of-age, love, loss, and friendship.

This research therefore aims to (1) contribute to the analysis of video games that represent a very local geographical context, which deserves greater attention, and (2) highlight the relationship between audiovisual language —framing— gameplay, and identification in order to explore narrative themes such as, in this case, nostalgia and the transition into adulthood. We've chosen *A Space for the Unbound* (Mojiken Studio, 2022), designed by a studio in Surabaya, Indonesia; *Last Time I Saw You* (Maboroshi Artworks, 2024), developed in Osaka, Japan; and *Until Then* (Polychroma Games, 2024), designed by a small Filipino studio, as our primary case studies. It is worth noting that the ludofictional worlds (Planells, 2017) these games are based on are an idealized reflection of their respective nations. For example, *A Space for the Unbound* presents a rural Indonesia in the 1990s, *Last Time I Saw You* offers a reimagined vision of 1980s Japan, and *Until Then* takes players on an adventure in the Philippines of 2014. Adding to our specific interest in investigating these titles with teenage protagonists, a bundle recently appeared on the digital distribution platform Steam featuring our three case studies, titled "End of Memories", highlighting their similarities under tags like "coming-of-age".

We wish to clarify that, although these games depict specific locations within the Asia-Pacific region, their designers or developers do not necessarily originate from that region. For instance, the game set in Japan was developed by a company based in Osaka, yet its principal developers are of Spanish origin. As discussed in the following sections, it has become increasingly difficult to identify studios whose authorship or headquarters can be explicitly associated with a single country.

METHODOLOGY: FRAMING, PLAYABILITY AND IDENTIFICATION

To conduct this research, we employed a methodology for analysing video games (Fernández-Vara, 2019; Cuadrado-Alvarado and Planells, 2020), their signification (Pérez-Latorre, 2012), and their grammar (Navarro-Remesal, 2016). Specifically, we focused on issues of framing and gaze design —what we see and from where we see it (Martín-Núñez, 2020; Anyó and Colom, 2021). This collective articulation produces "certain dramatic intentions that are executed in real time" (Martín-Núñez, 2021, p. 370), which are then subverted in the

ludonarrative. In this case, the goal is to enhance gameplay experiences centred around wounded protagonists during their maturation process. Additionally, we applied the analytical gameplay technique, combining our own gaming experience with external sources (Aarseth, 2007). Specifically, we consulted developer interviews and gameplays from other players, analysing how they play and react to specific elements of the game's design.

In the analysis of our case studies, we will, as we mentioned, focus on the set of forms and sensibilities defined by the game design elements that evoke an aesthetic experience in the player (Sicart, 2008); a dialectical space as the axis of ludofiction where we can "observe in detail the most relevant aspects of the work and interpret them" (Terrasa-Torres, 2022, p. 38). In this study, we focus on issues of artistic design and design of the gaze, addressing not only *what* is shown —what the game emphasizes or what it invites us to reflect on, for instance— but also *how* —the manner in which these audiovisual constructions are presented to us. Or, in other words, we conduct an analysis "around the relationship between framing, playability, and identification" (Martín-Núñez, 2021, p. 370), concerning the power granted —or withheld— through the gaze and the management of perspective, as well as audiovisual editing as an articulating element of the video ludic text (Martín-Núñez, 2021, p. 370.

On one hand, we address the limits of the image, or framing, encompassing both what is within the frame and what is deliberately left out. This contributes to generating emotional tension with the on-screen and off-screen space (Anyó and Colom, 2021, p. 90). This configuration is in line with the genre and its influences, which aim to "offer the player the best possible view to overcome obstacles and enjoy the playable experience" (Martín-Núñez, 2020, p. 80). Rune Klevjer argues that, from both game design and narrative perspectives, in most cases the control of three-dimensional environments is configured as a vehicle for exploration through which the player sees and is fictionally represented (2012, p. 35). Furthermore, it amplifies "emotions associated with the pure narrative enjoyment resulting from gathering all the information necessary to understand a story presented in bits and pieces" (Anyó and Colom, 2021, p. 90). Clara Fernández-Vara points out that "the story can remain the same while the player explores fragments of a story, which they can reassemble like a puzzle" (2020, p. 71). This is precisely possible in the video game medium due to the need for external intervention in the system: the player. Therefore, when we talk about framing, we not only revisit concepts inherited from cinematic language, but we also discuss a playable gaze. That is, as players, we move through space in a specific direction while being able to look around us, or in other words, "visually explore the space while physically traversing it" (Martín-Núñez, 2020, p. 82).

On the other hand, and related to the above, we have the term gameplay, which is understood as a player's construction made possible by the game rules, and which "is frequently effective for achieving a specific objective in the game" (Pérez-Latorre, 2012, p. 131). We know that "players have a central role in the development of the plot, which conditions their experience in the fiction world, a learning process that ideally provides a balance between failure and success" (Anyó and Colom, 2021, p. 93). It is no surprise, then, that the space designed for

this activity contributes to player enjoyment and ensures the stability and self-sufficiency of the fictional world (Planells, 2017). This construction is possible through the relationship between player and avatar; a relationship developed in response to the game's appearance "through an unrestricted semiotic of visual design, animation, text and music" (Burn and Schott, 2004, p. 230). These authors advocate the idea of a multimodal avatar that relates to the narrative —the heavy hero— and has the capacity to act within the system —the digital dummy— (Burn and Schott, 2004, p. 230). The configuration of the avatar and its relationship with the player determines a gameplay experience that will always be unique and non-replicable. In other words, no two playthroughs will ever be the same because, ultimately, the relationship between player and avatar is an intimate and personal matter.

Finally, Lluís Anyó and Àngel Colom emphasize the importance of the character, especially in narrative video games where "is the trigger, the force that sets the story in motion" (2021, p. 90). Some research points to player immersion in ludofiction, but as has been argued elsewhere in Game Studies, "the possibility of immersing oneself in a story, of crossing the boundary, is a characteristic of any fictional form, be it literary, audiovisual, or videoludic" (Colom, 2023, p. 61). Ultimately, immersion "is earned by an evolving craft-practice which is constantly adapting, extending, and refining complex sets of shared social and media conventions" (Murray, 2020, p. 24). We prefer, therefore, to speak of identification, understood as "the relationship between the player's extradiegetic actions and the character's intradiegetic actions" (Anyó and Colom, 2021, p. 93). Jon Robson and Aaron Meskin (2016) argue that video games are a medium that enables the deployment of "self-involving" fictions, which are about the players themselves insofar as they engage and act within a (ludo)fiction. For their part, Matthew Carlson and Logan Taylor propose the concept of "Fictional Proxy" to highlight how the player is responsible for the actions of their character, "and thereby makes sense of the way in which players talk about their gameplay experiences, and of the sense of moral responsibility that gameplay can engender" (2019, p. 18). It should be added that studying identification is problematic due to its affective component, which is not measurable and depends primarily on the player's level of engagement.

In summary, when we delve into the three case studies and try to answer the question "Who am I?", we do so by considering framing, playability and identification (Table 1). The combination of these elements determines the gaming experience and the relationship between ludofiction and the player, and vice versa. It is not just about answering *what* the proposals from three different countries —Indonesia, Japan, and the Philippines— tell us, but *how* they tell us.

Table 1. Three key elements of ludonarrative writing by Martín-Núñez (2021)

Ludonarrative Writing	Description	Questions
Framing	To analyse the frames created by virtual cameras, viewpoints and the playable gaze.	What is shown and what is hidden? How does this affect the player and their emotions?
Playability	Interaction between player and character/ avatar within the rules of the game.	What can the player do in the fictional game world? How does the player's agency influence the narrative? Are the mechanics significant to the narrative?
Identification	Relationship between the player's extradiegetic actions and the character's intradiegetic actions	Does the video game encourage the development of a bond between the player and the character? And how does it do this?

Source: Own elaboration.

INDIE GAMES IN (PART OF) ASIA-PACIFIC

Decades ago, academia already pointed out the absence of studies focusing on the Asia-Pacific market that moved away from the American or European perspective (Hjorth and Chan, 2009), which was almost exclusively written and published in English (Wolf, 2015). In fact, during this research, we have observed how the majority of scientific publications are primarily focused on Japan, South Korea, and China. These markets have traditionally been characterized by "diverse consumption and production patterns of gaming, mobile and broadband technologies, subject to local cultural and socio-economic nuances" (Hjorth and Chan, 2009, p. 3). Fortunately, in recent years, we have detected a trend towards analysing the nationality of video games from multiple disciplines (Wolf, 2015). However, as other authors argue, any "project that analyses the nationality of a game (and the always dangerous idea that this is measurable) will have to carefully navigate the minefield of material conditions and cultural markers" (Navarro-Remesal *et al*., 2024, p. 19). If in this article we delve into that "minefield" it is because we seek in these indie games "the repetitions, obsessions, and conflicts that run through them" (Navarro-Remesal *et al*., 2024, p. 19) and, in turn, it allows us "to understand contemporary global flows and the role gaming cultures play in an age of participatory, crossplatforming and collaborative media whereby rubrics such as 'players' and 'industries' are transforming" (Hjorth and Chan, 2009, p. 13).

It is important to note that we do not consider each case study to be representative of its country and the indie market, nor is that the aim of this article. We hope this analysis serves as a starting point for further, more in-depth research. Similarly, we have omitted many other Asian-Pacific countries —whose video games have a significant presence on platforms like Steam, Epic Games, and GOG— due to limitations. Below, we will try to outline the context of the indie market in Indonesia, Japan, and the Philippines while analysing each case study.

INDONESIA: A SPACE FOR THE UNBOUND

As has occurred in other regions, the video game market has been divided into three waves: console games, online games, and smartphone games. In Indonesia, however, the third wave "emerged during the 2000s, marked by the booming of smartphones in Indonesia" (Rakhmani and Darmawan, 2015, p. 251) and continues to be very popular and "is extending beyond its initial base of young, urban users" (p. 254). MMORPG titles like *Ragnarok Online* (Gravity, 2002) were highly popular, becoming a cultural phenomenon. The emergence of platforms like Steam, which promote digital distribution and foster the coexistence of independent video games with big-budget titles in the same ecosystem (Fiadotau, 2024), allows us, as players, to discover titles such as *A Space for the Unbound*. This game brings us closer to the cultural markers, desires, and fears of a specific society within a ludofiction infused with strong elements of fantasy. If, as Larissa Hjorth and Dean Chan argue, "by exploring gaming cultures in the region, insight can be gained into new forms of modernity —cross-cultural consumption and production processes— and how the region is shifting and evolving" (2009, p. 4), it also contributes to fostering an understanding of other cultures from a purely humanistic perspective. We mentioned that a single game cannot be representative of a country, much less for Indonesia, which is "a developing country with two hundred ethnic groups and six religions acknowledged by the state" (Rakhmani and Darmawan, 2015, p. 263). Nevertheless, *A Space for the Unbound* strives to place the player in a decipherable nostalgic context regardless of their country of origin, as we will reinforce in the following section on Japan.

A Space for the Unbound places us in rural Indonesia in the shoes of Atma, a high school student who repeatedly dreams of his own death. Alongside his best friend, Raya, the player discovers what the town is like beyond the high school, its people, and their relationships. In a context of poverty and a seemingly realistic world, Atma begins to witness paranormal occurrences that question his reality. Little by little, his best friend's personality darkens, revealing a villain who destroys each of the characters standing between her and the protagonist in an unreal world. The player discovers that Raya is, in fact, in a coma after attempting suicide, and that Atma, her avatar, is merely a divergent creation whose purpose is to help her wake up.

This Indonesian game, like many other titles close to the graphic adventure genre, features "markedly linear narrative structures, and thus the interactive dimension affects how easily players advance through the narrative more than the structure of the narrative itself" (Anyó and Colom, 2021, p. 93). It is a pixel art game with a side-scrolling perspective. While there is a map to help players orient themselves, movement is limited to horizontal progression. What is shown is clearly intentional on the part of its designers: residential streets highlight class differences, local shops evoke nostalgia —like a video rental store or an arcade— and there are natural, partially abandoned spaces. The objects that bring this ludofictional Indonesia to life are clearly marked by the 1990s, especially anything related to technology.

The main mechanics of this title are combat —which pays homage to the side-scrolling arcade fighting genre— and Atma's power to delve into the minds of certain characters to heal them through puzzles. The notebook he obtains in his reality allows him to help people who, for some reason, are not behaving as society expects. By accessing their psyche, the player must solve a puzzle to heal the victim. Through this gameplay, key themes surrounding mental health and nostalgia are experienced.

Lastly, the role of identification plays a fundamental part in *A Space for the Unbound*. Although the player takes control of Atma, he is just an avatar that has come to life. The real Atma died by drowning in that recurring dream that the player participates in at the start of the game. Thus, while the protagonist's personality and motivations reflect the original Atma, they are ultimately constructed by the player and their involvement with the ludofiction. The game presents scenarios in which the player can make trivial decisions through dialogue. The simple act of, for example, co-writing the "Atma & Raya's Epic Bucketlist" at the beginning of the game provides a space where the player projects their order of priorities within the fiction (Figure 1). In the end, the list contains the same elements for all players, but the order is determined by each player according to their preferences and how they wish to reflect part of themselves in the protagonist avatar.

Figure 1. ***A Space for the Unbound*** **(Mojiken Studio, 2022)**

Source: Steam.

A Space for the Unbound is an indie title that explores and (re)presents societal problems not only from Indonesia —and not just from the 90s— such as academic pressure, family conflicts, trauma, and depression. The ludonarrative writing presents, through an idyllic and romanticized past —at least visually— and a teenage protagonist —with school problems and existential doubts about an

uncertain future—, a macro-context that is problematized and resolved through fantasy elements. We observe that time jumps, the absence of information, or the protagonist's amnesia encourage player participation in reconstructing a story and trying to achieve the best outcome for the person who becomes, at least temporarily, their best friend.

JAPAN: LAST TIME I SAW YOU

Translating the indie concept in Japan is not easy when it competes with a second term —dōjin Soft or dōjin gēmu— which sparks debate both inside and outside the country (Fiadotau, 2019), for consumers and developers alike. Some games that straddle these definitions include *Rainy Season* (Inasa Fujio, 2020), *A Tavern of Tea* (npckc studio, 2019) and ママにゲーム隠された (*Mom hid my game*, hap Inc, 2017)[2]. Research surrounding gēmu, in addition to the international indie scene, has helped publicize the term dōjin and its differences from indie games. Martin Picard highlights the former as usually amateur creations, encompassing both original ideas and derivative works, though "they are particularly well known in this latter form, as fan fictions" (2021, p. 26). Other authors point to the international distribution of these titles, with dōjin being more limited to the Japanese market (Grau de Pablos, 2023). It happens, however, that certain dōjin video games have succeeded outside of Japan, which is why "we should not essentialize indie and dōjin games as respectively Westernand Japanese or equate their cultural presence with their locales of origin" (Fiadotau, 2019, p. 66). This very particular scene in the Japanese market demonstrates how "the Asia-Pacific provides an exemplary case study on one of the most buoyant and yet culturally divergent regions in the world" (Hjorth and Chan, 2009, p. 1).

Just as we mentioned in the previous case how the pixel aesthetic was able to describe a rural Indonesian village in detail, in *Last Time I Saw You* it is worth noting its hand-drawn graphics and its characteristic manga/anime style, which "have added their own elements and personality to gēmu" (Navarro-Remesal and Loriguillo-López, 2015, p. 9). While the side-scrolling works in the same way as in the other case studies, the Japanese approach is influenced by the local history of the industry, which "evolved aesthetically from, or at least inherited traits from, manga and anime" (Navarro-Remesal and Loriguillo-López, 2015, p. 11), as well as by a disinterest in "grand narratives of worlds, but rather for the little narratives that are constructed to allow affective responses to characters" (Picard, 2021, p. 28). Usually, the characters are designed to be appealing for players in gēmu; for readers in manga; and for viewers in anime. We can see this in the attractive design of the Yokai and other fantastic creatures that the player

2 In 2023, the Japan Foundation Madrid published the series "Gêmu: Video Game Creators in Japan" which sought to address the differences between dōjin and indie directly from Japanese creators themselves. https://youtu.be/6B2ZmmevqNU?feature=shared

associates with the Japanese media-mix and the otaku subculture (Picard, 2021, p. 28). Unlike mainstream games, the indie market, as we have argued before, allows its developers to take certain risks, and in *Last Time I Saw You* we detect this in its ludonarrative writing.

Ayumi is grappling with his first teenage problems, which challenge his identity. When the player takes control of this twelve-year-old boy, a typhoon is approaching the small Japanese village where he lives, bringing with it a curse. Ayumi can explore his home, his neighbourhood, and other places that make up his routine, like the school. And although the game "share thematic, tonal, and narrative traits, to the point that we could expand the notion of manganime to mangēmunime" (Navarro-Remesal and Loriguillo-López, 2015, p. 11), we identify themes that are not usually addressed in more popular gēmu or with such precision. Thus, players see how all family problems affect a child's growth into adolescence: family pressure due to parental expectations, the feeling of misunderstanding that arises in adolescence, the silent grief over his recently deceased grandfather, and other issues of lineage inherited from parents to children. Unlike other mainstream video games, in *Last Time I Saw You* we encounter scenes in which the player can express their affection toward their parents or friends. These sequences are framed in a way that highlights affection at the centre, surrounded by lighting and its absence. The colours used convey cozyness, even when the emotions that surface are sad (Figure 2). These small gestures facilitate the player's identification with their preadolescent character.

Figure 2. *Last Time I Saw You* (Maboroshi Artworks, 2024)

Source: Steam.

In this maelstrom of emotions the player must contend with, Ayumi discovers that his dreams are connected to a fantasy world where he falls in love with a

girl. In this narrative layer, rich with fantastical elements, the mangēmunime elements unfold: Yokai —kappas, smart-crows, and other talking animals— magic, and curses. At the same time, in both the real and magical worlds, the game showcases cultural elements of Japan: from its architecture to the folklore and mythology that shape its customs and beliefs. For example, to save your game, you have to find and interact with a shrine. All these cultural markers are a draw for Western players who idealize Japan in an increasingly globalized world, but this idealization should not endorse or promote forms of Westernization or Japanism based on Orientalism (Consalvo, 2016; Idone-Cassone, 2020).

In all three case studies, there is a clearly intentional design to evoke a sense of nostalgia in the player, even when Western players have not experienced that childhood or adolescence in Asian-Pacific settings. As Víctor Navarro-Remesal and Beatriz Pérez-Zapata (2025) argue regarding Gagex titles, these games offer nostalgia for the unlived and for others' memories because they evoke universal past experiences: a familiarity that enhances a postmodern sense of homelessness. It is particularly interesting how, in the specific case of *Last Time I Saw You*, the awareness of the impossibility of returning to the home of the past, with those deceased relatives or in places that no longer exist, emerges in Ayumi as a form of bitter nostalgia during his evolution into adolescence. The game achieves this through its playability: through those dreamlike adventures and the obstacles and puzzles he must face. What is more, the growing sense of emptiness, which he will not be able to completely soothe, is counterbalanced by the discovery of positive feelings: his first love, or the strengthening of his best friends.

Maboroshi Artworks' offering is interesting to investigate further precisely because it emanates elements characteristic of gēmu while leveraging the experimental space offered by the indie and globalized market. Here, the ludonarrative writing strives to build a recognizable audiovisual atmosphere similar to that of a cozy game, but adapting mechanics and perspectives from other genres, such as platformers, albeit with reduced mechanical difficulty. It is even more interesting to note that, as is the case with much of modern video game production, the development team is not entirely Japanese. In the case of *Last Time I Saw You*, the main creators are people who live or have lived in Japan for many years, but whose nationality is different. This undoubtedly influences the ludonarrative writing, as it is a perspective shaped by multiple viewpoints that highlight certain Japanese cultural elements and transform them into the language of video games.

PHILIPPINES: UNTIL THEN

Mark is fifteen years old and lives alone at home because his parents work abroad. The player, who begins this interactive fiction with the promise of being set in the Philippines in 2014, soon discovers they are in a dystopia where the world seems to have changed after a global catastrophe. The fragmentation of space-time becomes a recurring theme in this investigation, much more akin to *A Space for the Unbound*, alluding here to a generational trauma. This is possibly

a reflection of the various global crises of our century that primarily afflict new generations.

Until Then is presented as a visual novel where player choices determine the course of the story. Its aesthetic stands out for the use of pixel art with partially three-dimensional environments (Figure 3); that is, the camera changes location within the same scene, allowing the player to view the same space from multiple angles. Furthermore, the static framing characteristic of 2D side-scrolling games —which only moves with the character's walking— takes on a more dynamic role here, imitating a shoulder-mounted or tracking shot and employing camera angles more typical of cinema. In fact, the studio highlights "a Cinematic Visual Experience"[3] in their proposal. Split screens are also commonly used for moments when the mobile phone is in use: this way, Mark can read and write in chats with other characters or interact on their social media profiles. Generally, camera control is partially removed from the player, and this, by design, offers, in return, "the most suitable shot to generate a specific feeling" (Martín-Núñez, 2020, p. 83).

Figure 3. *Until Then* (Polychroma Games, 2024)

Source: Steam.

The dedicated attention to art design in *Until Then* is not random in a country where the industry has specialized in game art, 3D animation, and video games since 2001 (Escribano-Manzano, 2016). After the lifting of the ban on video game use in the Philippines, developers in the country have traditionally provided their

3 Source: https://untilthengame.com/

services to design video games for foreign companies. Consequently, in 2016, the Filipino share in the global video game market was still anecdotal (Escribano-Manzano, 2016). This situation makes it difficult to trace the footprint of Filipino video games in relation to Asia-Pacific and to foster dialogue with the rest of the world. Despite this contextual void, which we also detect in research on the indie industry in the Philippines, we can attempt to unravel *Until Then*'s narrative writing, always bearing in mind that "in contrast to Japan and to some extent Korea, many developing Asian markets have not yet developed culturally-unique products with a universal appeal" (Tschang, 2009, p. 37).

When Mark navigates the game world in *Until Then*, players often try to identify elements around him with other Asian cultures, primarily Japan, due to its global video game industry heritage. Sometimes, it is not just about identifying and deciphering cultural nuances, but also recognizing recurring spaces, like convenience stores[4]. This situation is common in countries without a long tradition in cultural industries, as "nor have they created universally-appealing forms of popular culture, be it science fiction, fantasy or alternate reality genres of literature or film, that can be turned into video games and other creative products, let alone a domestic 'style' of games or animation" (Tschang, 2009, p. 37).

However, themes of maturity, love, loss, and friendship are universal, allowing every player to identify with the plot and characters of *Until Then* and its extensive dialogues. Visual novels, a legacy from Japan that for years were practically unknown in the West (Navarro-Remesal and Loriguillo-López, 2015), are "choice-based games with branching narrative featuring prose passages to tell their stories" (Finley, 2022, xix). Their consequences make the game challenging and feel "alive and believable" (Finley, 2022, p. 95). Scripted or branching-narrative titles "relies primarily on the preauthored progression of the game's story elements to generate the experience" (Formosa *et al*., 2016, p. 213), giving designers broad control over the sequence of events. This allows them to consciously engage with sensitive themes or situations where they "can give the player more incentive to role-play a consistent moral identity" (Formosa *et al*., 2016, p. 221). Therefore, in *Until Then*, we also find a meticulously crafted treatment of choices, decisions, and branching narratives, further articulated through the game's perspective and framing.

Lastly, it is worth considering how the player's choices are presented, as this is also a matter of ludonarrative design. We have observed that the most significant and extensive opportunity for players to control Mark's responses is through the

4 Konbini (コンビニ) are very popular in Japan and its society, but also to the eyes of foreigners, even though this business model was born in the USA. Such is the depth of konbini's influence that it is common to find references to the most iconic companies (either by their colors or numbers) in video games, or even for the game's fiction itself to revolve around konbini, like *inKONBINI: One Store. Many Stories* (Nagai Industries, 2026).

smartphone. In this type of dialogue, it feels more natural for the player to pause and consider their answers. While *Until Then*, like other narrative and decision-based video games, uses a linear-branching narrative with multiple endings (Pérez-Latorre, 2012; Finley, 2022), the interesting aspect is providing space and response to player agency. This means it "is not about selecting between options in this case, but is instead about expressing intent, and receiving a satisfying response to that intent" (Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum, 2009, p. 9). The player needs to feel heard —even when their decisions do not have major consequences on the ludonarrative— to reflect on, in this case, trauma, anxiety, or trauma from the perspective of a confused and lost teenager.

This Filipino video game strongly resembles the Indonesian title, both in its pixel art style and its themes of coming-of-age and loss. However, the two offerings take different paths that are worth highlighting. While *A Space for the Unbound* leans into a late 20th-century nostalgia affected by fantasy elements more typical of puzzle films, *Until Then* uses the dystopian genre, starting from the year 2014, barely a decade from when this article is being written. This game relies on elements the player links to the retro, at least technologically —those mobile phones are now obsolete—, and even revives narrative conflicts more characteristic of 20th-century television science fiction, such as disappearances and subsequent investigations by groups of teenagers who act as saviours but are profoundly wounded.

CONCLUSIONS TO THE BEGINNING OF MEMORIES

Conscious that the lack of research on indie video games in certain Asian-Pacific countries, which are increasingly present in the global market, has limited this study, we can try to draw some conclusions, at least as a new starting point for the future. We insist that our interest in classifying video games by nationality has no greater ambition than to investigate the presence of distinctive artistic styles, as well as regional or national identities that shape ludonarrative writing.

From the perspective of framing, playability, and identification, we conclude that all three case studies use the adolescent character —their anguish in the search for identity and how to fit into society— as the main link with the player, who is thrust into a game world where reality is affected by a fantasy represented in pixel art or with hand-drawn illustrations, but always steering away from hyperrealism. Whether through time travel or deep dreams, the protagonists, all of them male, take an active role in a situation that overwhelms them and is not easy to unravel. The player permeates the limits and fears of these characters to take action through disparate mechanics and dynamics: solving puzzles and fighting in the street (*A Space for the Unbound*), mastering horizontal and vertical space with jumps and using powers as in platformers (*Last Time I Saw You*), or focusing on dialogue and decision-making (*Until Then*). The different ways of approaching coming-of-age ludonarratives, in turn, reveal alternatives for game design to promote player identification with universal themes such as love, loss, and friendship.

Alberto Porta Pérez, PhD in Communication Sciences from Jaume I University. At the university, he works as a lecturer for the module "Hypermedia Narrative and Video Game Analysis" within the Video Game Design and Development Degree program, as well as for the courses "Communication Technology" and "Theory and Technique of Radio and Television" in the Audiovisual Communication program. He's a member of the IRMA-VEP research group, the coordinator of *L'Atalante. Revista de Estudios Cinematográficos*, and a member of LudoSpain, a working group affiliated with the SIBE Ethnomusicology Society. His research interests lie in Game Studies, specifically narrative design, ethical dilemmas, and ludomusicology. He earned a Degree in Audiovisual Communication (Extraordinary Award, 2013/2014), a Master's degree in New Trends and Innovation Processes in Communication (Extraordinary Award, 2019/2020), and a postgraduate degree in Japanese Studies from the University of Valencia. During his doctoral studies, he was a visiting researcher at the Ritsumeikan Center for Game Studies at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto.

REFERENCES

Aarseth, Espen (2007). Investigación sobre juegos: Aproximaciones metodológicas al análisis de juegos. *Artnodes, 7*. UOC. https://doi.org/10.7238/a.v0i7.763

Anyó, Lluís (2023). Videojuego indie y estética local. La singular representación de la cultura española en Blasphemous. In 1r Simposi sobre Investigació a la Indústria Indie del Videojoc (I3V 2023), Terrassa, 27 Octubre, 2023. http://hdl.handle.net/2117/397590

Anyó, Lluís and Colom, Àngel (2021). Emotional Ambivalence in 'The Last of Us'. Emotion in Video Games, Between Narrative Complexity and Player Loyalty. *L'Atalante. Journal of Film Studies*, (31), 85-102. https://doi.org/10.63700/858

Burn, Andrew and Schott, Gareth (2004). Heavy hero and digital dummy: Multimodal player avatar relations in Final Fantasy 7. *Visual Communication, 3*(2), 213-233. https://doi.org/10.1177/147035704043041

Carlson, Matthew and Taylor, Logan (2019). Me and my avatar: Player-character as fictional proxy. *Journal of the Philosophy of Games, 2*(1). http://dx.doi.org/10.5617/jpg.6230

Colom, Àngel (2023). *Dar crédito a la ficción jugada. El personaje jugador como agente multidimensional generador de verosimilitud en el videojuego narrativo*. [PhD Thesis] Universitat Ramon Llull. http://hdl.handle.net/10803/688563

Consalvo, Mia (2016). *Atari to Zelda. Japan's videogames in global contexts*. The MIT Press.

Cuadrado-Alvarado, Alfonso and Planells, Antonio J. (2020). *Ficción y videojuegos: Teoría y práctica de la ludonarración*. Editorial UOC.

Escribano-Manzano, Guillermo (2016). *Las industrias culturales y creativas en Filipinas: Talento al servicio del desarrollo socioeconómico*. Boletín Económico de ICE, (3074).

Fernández-Vara, Clara (2019). *Introduction to game analysis. Second Edition*. Routledge.

Fernández-Vara, Clara (2020). Elecciones. Diseño narrativo de decisiones y ramificaciones. In Víctor Navarro Remesal (ed.), *Pensar el juego. 25 caminos para los game studies* (pp. 64-71). Shangrila Textos Aparte.

Fiadotau, Mikhail (2019). Indie and dōjin games: A multilayered cross-cultural compa-

rison. *Gamevironments*, *10*, 39-84. http://www.gamevironments.uni-bremen.de

Fiadotau, Mikhail (2024). Indie game. In Lee Newton (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of computer graphics and games*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-23161-2_188

Finley, T. Kristen (2022). *Branching story, unlocked dialogue: Designing and writing visual novels*. Boca Raton: CRC Press.

Formosa, Paul; Ryan, Malcolm, and Staines, Dan (2016). Papers, please and the systemic approach to engaging ethical expertise in videogames. *Ethics and Information Technology, 18*, 211-225. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-016-9407-z

Garda, Maria B. and Grabarczyk, Pawel (2016). Is every Indie game independent? Towards the concept of independent game. *Game Studies, 16*(1). https://gamestudies.org/1601/articles/Gardagrabarczyk/

Grau de Pablos, Tomás (2023). Entre lo Indie y lo Dōjin: La construcción discursiva del juego japonés independiente. In 1r Simposi sobre Investigació a la Indústria Indie del Videojoc (I3V 2023), Terrassa, 27 Octubre, 2023. http://hdl.handle.net/2117/397598

Hjorth, Larissa and Chan, Dean (2009). *Gaming cultures and place in Asia-Pacific*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203875957

Idone-Cassone, Vincenzo (2020). The Japanese influences on cultural gamification. *Replaying Japan, 2*, 49-59. http://doi.org/10.34382/00013362

Klevjer, Rune (2012). Enter the avatar. The phenomenology of prosthetic telepresence in computer games. In Hallvard Fossheim, Tarjei Mandt Larsen and John Richard Sageng (Eds.), *The philosophy of computer games* (pp. 17-38). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4249-9_3

Martín-Núñez, Marta (2020). Encuadres. Diseñar la escritura audiovisual del videojuego. In Víctor Navarro Remesal (Ed.), *Pensar el juego. 25 caminos para los Game Studies*. Shangrila Textos Aparte.

Martín-Núñez, Marta (2021). El estudio de la narrativa hipermedia y los videojuegos en el campo de las Ciencias de la Comunicación. [Proyecto docente, Universitat Jaume I]. No publicado.

Murray, Janet H. (2020). Virtual/reality: How to tell the difference. *Journal of Visual Culture, 19*(1), 11-27. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412920906253

Navarro-Remesal, Víctor (2016). *Libertad dirigida. Una gramática del análisis y diseño de videojuegos*. Shangrila Textos Aparte.

Navarro-Remesal, Víctor and Loriguillo-López, Antonio (2015). What makes Gêmu different? A look at the distinctive design traits of Japanese video games and their place in the Japanese media mix. *Journal of Games Criticism, 2*(1), 1-17. http://doi.org/10.17613/m3zg4-fbh45

Navarro-Remesal, Víctor; Pérez-Latorre, Óliver, and Fernández-Vara, Clara (2024). Introducción. Fragmentar y desfragmentar el videojuego europeo. In Óliver Pérez-Latorre, Víctor Navarro Remesal and Clara Fernández-Vara (eds.), *Fragmentos y microhistorias del videojuego europeo*. Shangrila Textos Aparte.

Navarro-Remesal, Víctor and Beatriz Pérez Zapata (2025). The Flavor of Late Shōwa: Coziness, food, and nostalgia in Gagex games. In Rachael Hutchinson (ed.), *Handbook of Japanese games and gameplay*. Amsterdam University Press, 2025. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.29214622.20

Pérez-Latorre, Óliver (2012). *El lenguaje videolúdico: Análisis de la significación del videojuego*. Laertes.

Pérez-Latorre, Óliver (2016). Indie or mainstream? Tensions and nuances between the alternative and the mainstream in Indie games. *Anàlisi. Quaderns de Comunicació i Cultura, 54*, 15-30. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7238/a.v0i54.2818

Picard, Martin (2021). Gēmu communities and Otaku consumption. The (sub) culture(s) of videogames in Japan. In Martin Roth, Hiros-

hi Yoshida, and Martin Picard (Eds.), *Japan's contemporary media culture between local and global. Content, practice and theory*. CrossAsia. https://doi.org/10.11588/xabooks.971

Planells, Antonio J. (2017). *Possible worlds in video games: From classic narrative to meaningful actions*. ETCPress.

Rakhmani, Inaya and Darmawan, Hikmat (2015). Indonesia. In Mark J. P. Wolf (Ed), *Video games around the world*. The MIT Press.

Robson, Jon and Meskin, Aaron (2016). Video games as self-involving interactive fictions. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 74*(2), 184-187. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44510494

Sicart, Miguel (2008). Defining game mechanics. *Game studies, 8*(2), 1-14. https://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart

Tanenbaum, Karen and Tanenbaum, Theresa J. (2009). Commitment to meaning: A reframing of agency in games. *UC Irvine: Digital arts and culture*. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6f49r74n

Terrasa-Torres, Mateo (2022). *La estética de la dificultad: Teoría y motivos en el videojuego*. Shangrila Textos Aparte.

Trépanier-Jobint, Gabrielle (2016). Differentiating serious, persuasive, and expressive games. *Kinephanos. Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture*, Special issue, 107-128.

Tschang, Ted (2009). Creative industries across cultural borders: The case of video games in Asia. In Lily Kong and Justin O'Connor (Eds.), *Creative economies, creative cities: Asian-European perspectives*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9949-6_3

Wolf, Mark J. P. (2015). *Video games around the world*. The MIT Press.

Fundamentals

Tripodos, number 59 | 2026 | 152-168
ISSN: 1138-3305

Received: 05-07-24
Accepted: 21-11-24
OnlineFirst: 02-03-26
Final publication: 01-06-26

Fiction Based on Real Events as an Informative Experience: A Theoretical Proposal

Lucía Gastón-Lorente
Journalism Department, University of Navarra (Spain)

If fiction based on real events competes with media, social networks, and institutions in the task of making sense of reality within the same communicative ecosystem; if these fictions are often based on a specific journalistic piece or investigation and have the capacity to reach the screens of millions of viewers, wouldn't it be interesting to study this type of fiction from the perspective of journalism studies?

This theoretical article explores the possibilities of fiction based on real events as a means of interpreting reality. To this end, it delves into the concept of docudrama proposed by Paget (2011) and Lipkin (2009), analyses the crises in journalism identified by Mayoral (2018), and concludes that the idea of informative experience presented by Swart et al. (2022) should also be applied to these fictions. In other words, these types of productions should be studied from the perspective of journalism studies.

Keywords: *based on real events, journalism, informative experience, fiction, audience, communicative ecosystem.*

Si las ficciones basadas en hechos reales compiten con los medios, las redes sociales y las instituciones en la tarea de dar sentido a la realidad dentro de un mismo ecosistema comunicativo; si estas ficciones suelen basarse en una pieza o investigación periodística específica y tienen la capacidad de llegar a las pantallas de millones de espectadores, ¿no sería interesante estudiarlas desde la perspectiva de los estudios de periodismo?

Este artículo teórico explora las posibilidades de las ficciones basadas en hechos reales como medios para interpretar la realidad. Para ello, profundiza en el concepto de docudrama propuesto por Paget (2011) y Lipkin (2009), analiza las crisis del periodismo expuestas por Mayoral (2018) y concluye que la idea de experiencia informativa presentada por Swart et al. (2022) debería aplicarse a estas ficciones. Es decir, estas producciones deberían estudiarse desde la perspectiva de los estudios de periodismo.

Palabras clave: *basado en hechos reales, periodismo, experiencia informativa, ficción, audiencia, ecosistema comunicativo.*

Doi.org/10.51698/tripodos.2026.59.04

Fiction based on real events occupies a significant space within the audiovisual landscape. Four of the five productions nominated for Best Limited or Anthology Series at the 2022 Emmy Awards were miniseries based on real events (Television Academy, n.d.). Just a few months later, four of the five works nominated for the 2023 Golden Globes in the same category were also miniseries based on real events (Golden Globes, n.d.). In some cases, these miniseries are based on autobiographies or the testimonies of the protagonists themselves. In others, the fiction stems from prior journalistic research or documentation work, or is directly inspired by a specific piece produced by journalists.

While these works are not journalism, they enter the homes of millions of viewers worldwide to tell, through fiction and often inspired by what has already been told by journalism, a real story with real names. Thus, in an era when journalism, buried under the demands of immediacy, clickbait, and misinformation, loses its status as the primary source of reality and sense-making, they can fill that space and be capable of "modifying the social perception of reality"[1] (Pedregal, 2019). And they are doing it more and more everyday. But what happens if viewers have the fictionalized narration of a real story as their only version of events? Can a fiction based on real events "provide citizens with the information they need to be free and capable of self-governance" (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2012, p. 18)?

Fiction based on real events has long been part of the audiovisual landscape, yet journalism has struggled to address the crises it faces for nearly two decades. While the relationship between journalism and fiction is not new, this paper proposes a shift in perspective: it argues that such fictions should be studied within Journalism Studies as an informative experience.

Traditionally, research has focused on how journalism uses fiction to enhance storytelling. However, this paper examines how audiovisual fiction now uses journalism —its narratives, themes, and even specific reports— to tell stories.

Journalism and fiction mix in a communicative and digital ecosystem where all agents compete for the audience's attention through narratives where the line between real and fiction blurs more each day, and where the overabundance of content makes it impossible for citizens to consume everything. This reality together with the lack of trust in the media make it worth analysing how narratives that are not journalism fulfill or can fulfil the functions historically attributed to this discipline. Especially those narratives that garner the audience successes that journalism no longer enjoys. And here, in particular, come series based on real events.

This article adopts a theoretical approach, focusing on the reflection and analysis of key concepts within communication and journalism studies. Instead of utilizing an empirical approach, the study connects previously separate notions through a process of conceptualization and critical analysis. Various theoretical frameworks and prior definitions, such as the notion of docudrama

1 Translated from Spanish.

as a spectrum proposed by Woodhead (1999), the crisis in journalism within the digital environment (Mayoral, 2018), and Swart *et al*. (2022) concept of informational experience, were utilized.

All of these concepts are examined throughout the article in three main sections: the notion of docudrama, the position of journalism and fiction based on real events within an increasingly competitive communicative ecosystem, and the concept of informative experience and its potential application to fiction based on real events. It is considered that structuring the article in these three theoretical sections facilitates progress towards the conclusion, which proposes a new perspective for Journalism studies: fictions based on real events should be studied as an informational experience.

THE CONCEPT OF "BASED ON REAL EVENTS"

Fictions based on real events, or docudramas, emerged simultaneously in the second half of the 20th century in the United States and the United Kingdom, although not identically. Despite quickly making their way to cinemas and now proliferating on streaming platforms, they were born within the television discourse (Raventós Mercadé *et al*., 2012; Barroso, 2005; Paget, 2011).

Today, the term that seems to have permeated globally, resulting from the unification of the two Anglo-Saxon traditions, is "docudrama". However, as Raventós Mercadé *et al*. (2012, p. 124) assert, "it is not (...) just a terminological issue, but also defining the type of works that dominate today"[2]. Now, "the dominant model (...) is articulated (...) on three main features: the indexical roots of the British drama documentary, the melodramatic coding of the American documentary drama, and, consequently, greater social, moral, and ethical repercussions"[3] (Raventós Mercadé *et al*., 2012, p. 124). This conception of the docudrama is further enhanced by the golden age of television fiction, which in recent decades has resulted in an improvement in the quality of productions and has been accompanied by a key element: seriality (García-Martínez, 2014; Hudelet and Crémieux, 2021).

All these considerations make the term "docudrama" used to denote a wide range of dramatic forms, making it very complicated (if not impossible) to propose a definition capable of encompassing all its manifestations (Rosenthal, 1999; Raventós Mercadé *et al*., 2012). However, many proposals have been made (Hoffer and Nelson, 1978; 1980; Woodhead, 1999; Lipkin, 2002; 2011; Paget, 2011). Of all of them, perhaps the one most aligned with this research is that of Woodhead (1999, p. 103), who understands docudrama as "a spectrum that runs from journalistic reconstruction to relevant drama with infinite graduations along the way". Some authors like Rosenthal (1999, 2013) and Raventós Mercadé

2 Translated from Spanish.

3 Translated from Spanish.

et al. (2012) support Woodhead's consideration and try to find a common denominator among all the forms included in that spectrum. Rosenthal (1999), for example, states that there are two common characteristics among all products that fall under the docudrama umbrella: "They are all based on or inspired by reality, by the lives of real people, or by events that have happened in the recent or not too distant past" (XV) and "they (...) seem to have a higher responsibility to accuracy and to truth than does fiction" (XV).

The difficulty with these considerations, as Woodhead points out, is that it is very difficult to establish absolute categories; there are very different works of fiction that could be included within this notion of docudrama. Thus, numerous studies consider productions under the term docudrama that do not respond to what is considered docudrama in this article (Barroso, 2005; Formenti, 2014; Augustine and Xavier, 2021; Donnelly and Shaw, 2020; Hudelet, 2018). This does not mean they are not docudramas. Simply, the productions they analyze are at a different point on the spectrum proposed by Woodhead.

Therefore, it is necessary to clarify what we mean in this article when we refer to fiction based on real events. We understand them as audiovisual fiction productions that carry out a dramatic reconstruction of a real event or events using, except for exceptions, the real names of the people, institutions, and places involved. This dramatic reconstruction involves the creation of a fictional script with the consequent licenses and narrative adaptations (temporal alterations; invention or alteration of scenes or sequences; plot simplification or elimination of subplots; invention of characters that encompass or represent a group; invention of dialogues and interpretations of the characters; etc.), but they start from journalistic research/documentation, carried out for the creation of the script or previously, serving as the piece that the fiction aims to adapt. These are, therefore, fictions that not only coexist with journalism in the current communicative ecosystem but also do so by telling the same stories.

JOURNALISM IN THE CURRENT COMMUNICATIVE ECOSYSTEM

According to the 2024 Digital News Report, 39 % of people interviewed in 47 different countries avoid the news and 40 % do not trust them (Interactive DNR 2024, n.d.). The increase in news disconnection goes hand in hand with a loss of interest in news. In fact, Spain is one of the countries that has experienced one of the largest falls in that matter (Interactive DNR 2024, n.d.).

But people's news avoidance does not mean citizens do not seek to be informed. When asked about what they need from news, 72 % of interviewees say they need to be updated; 67 % think they also need to be educated; and 63 % say they want to have access to different perspectives (Interactive DNR 2024, n.d.). Citizens do seek to be informed. They turn to a predominantly digital environment to learn about what is happening, but also to consume non-journalistic stories that can help them understand their surroundings. Aramburu-Moncada states:

> The journalist, who for many years has operated alone in their role as interpreter of reality, now shares the informational stage with men and women who, without journalistic knowledge, have at their disposal a wide network of contacts and the necessary influence for the news they disseminate to generate opinions and comments in society[4] (Aramburu-Moncada, 2022, p. 134).

Thus, the digital ecosystem becomes a communicative ecosystem where everyone competes for the audience's attention through stories. Everything happens simultaneously and even on the same device, especially through the smartphone, which stands out as the ultimate meta-medium of the 21st century (Beckett and Deuze, 2016; Márquez, 2017). In this undoubtedly competitive ecosystem where everything is intertwined, distrust in the media and the growing trend of news avoidance contribute to the proliferation of journalism's looming threats, such as fake news, sensationalism, and the diminishing perception of journalism as a public service.

The Crisis of Journalism

Casero-Ripollés (2014, p. 256) states, "journalistic information is losing its exchange value"[5]. According to him, the overabundance of information brought by the Internet, the loss of credibility of conventional media, and the absence of a viable business model in the digital environment are causing journalistic information to become "a commodity that consumers are increasingly unwilling to pay for"[6] (Casero-Ripollés, 2014, p. 256). Similarly, Javier Mayoral (2018) identifies five crises threatening journalism.

Firstly, Mayoral (2018, p. 20) addresses the economic crisis that revolutionized the global economy in 2007 and particularly affected the media, which had anticipated "a scenario of grandeur and splendor"[7]. Journalism, whose business model had been in crisis for decades, faced an intensification of its problems at the beginning of the 21st century (Campos-Freire *et al.*, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen *et al.*, 2016) and could no longer deny the business model crisis (the second crisis identified by Mayoral). This crisis resulted from the loss of advertising revenue due to the growth of the Internet and the digital environment. Traditional media's difficulty in offering advertisers a personalized and segmented audience (Farias Batlle and Roses, 2009; Mayoral, 2018) was compounded by the emergence of new competitors who could provide the desired audience.

Journalism then faced the challenge of overcoming a problem that was not just a "temporary setback" (Farias Batlle and Roses, 2009, p. 19) but also a change

4 Translated from Spanish.

5 Translated from Spanish.

6 Translated from Spanish.

7 Translated from Spanish.

in the environment requiring a "colossal transformation" (Fernández Barrero, 2022, p. 19). In this transformation, where information consumption becomes predominantly online, media outlets resorted to traditional measures: staff reductions, decreased print runs, company concentration, integration of media into non-journalistic businesses, salary adjustments, publication closures, etc. (Farias Batlle and Roses, 2009; Sánchez de la Nieta, 2016; Deuze and Witschge, 2018; Fernández Barrero, 2022). The result? Another crisis (the third one), this time of a labor nature. Cuts and adjustments in media companies led to job instability within the profession, where journalists are forced to multitask, and freelancers play a prominent role (Wahl-Jorgensen *et al.*, 2016; Ufarte Ruiz and Murcia Verdú, 2022). Job instability and budget cuts naturally lead to a decline in content quality (Deuze and Witschge, 2018). Additionally, content quality has been affected by the other two crises identified by Mayoral (2018): the digital revolution and the loss of media credibility.

Technological advancements have been a constant in journalism's evolution since its inception, often serving as its engine (Fernández Barrero, 2022; Micó *et al.*, 2022). However, despite the significance of all industrial revolutions, the advent of the Internet has posed the greatest technological challenge to date (Micó *et al.*, 2022). Who knows if Artificial Intelligence will surpass it.

The technological revolution brought by the Internet has disrupted traditional journalism models and introduced new agents and competitors (Wahl-Jorgensen *et al.*, 2016). It also enables new forms of journalism, such as immersive journalism, mobile journalism, and data journalism, and introduces new tools like drones, 360-degree videos, and gamification that can revolutionize traditional information presentation (Fernández Barrero, 2022). However, economic limitations facing media companies often hinder the implementation or evolution of these new tools (Fernández Barrero, 2022; Micó *et al.*, 2022).

Simultaneously, the technological revolution fosters an "extremely competitive" market (Bazaco *et al.*, 2019, p. 96) where journalists, immersed in an ecosystem where it is difficult to maintain their gatekeeper role, are forced to constantly update information, which can lead to errors. Additionally, the atomized style imposed by social media fragments the narrative and eliminates seriality, often resulting in incomplete and decontextualized information that hinders audience comprehension and retention (Ufarte Ruiz and Murcia Verdú, 2022). It might be worth noting here that while journalism seems to fragment its narrative, fiction based on real events often maintains that serial narration, providing context and meaning for the same stories journalism tells. However, Ufarte Ruiz and Murcia Verdú's (2022) considerations only account for online journalistic information, especially that distributed via social media, so it would be unfair to extrapolate their conclusions to other journalistic works.

The journalist's task is "to select facts (important) and turn them into stories (interesting)"[8] (Mayoral, 2018, p. 103). However, if the scarcity of time and

8 Translated from Spanish.

resources prevents proper verification, source checking, and contextualization, and if the journalist loses objectivity —not in an absolute sense but in relation to their procedures— they break the reading pact with the audience, who then strips them of the credibility previously granted (Mayoral, 2018).

Many authors identify the loss of credibility as one of journalism's fundamental problems (Brants and Haan, 2010; Casero-Ripollés, 2014; Mayoral, 2018; Fink, 2019; Ufarte Ruiz and Murcia Verdú, 2022). For decades, this credibility was taken for granted (Brants and Haan, 2010), but the demands of immediacy, with its associated errors and source reductions (Mayoral, 2018; Ufarte Ruiz and Murcia Verdú, 2022); the rise of misinformation (Fernández Barrero, 2022; Sádaba-Chalezquer and Salaverría-Aliaga, 2022); the proliferation of attention-grabbing techniques like clickbait and the pursuit of virality through social media (Fink, 2019); and the increasing commodification and politicization of information in an environment where trust in public authorities and institutions is steadily declining (Casero-Ripollés, 2014; Fink, 2019), among other factors, have undermined the credibility the audience once placed in the journalistic profession.

According to the Digital News Report, only 40 % of global respondents claim to trust the veracity of the news (Interactive DNR 2024, n.d.). This scepticism, previously predominant only among younger generations, is now spreading to older age groups as well (Vara-Miguel *et al.*, 2022). The Edelman Trust Barometer of 2023 reflects a similar sentiment. According to this study, promoted by the communication agency Edelman, only 48 % of respondents in Spain trust the media (2024 Edelman Trust Barometer, n.d.).

The lack of economic resources to adapt to technological changes, the business model crisis caused by reduced advertising investment, and the widespread labour instability in media companies, among other realities, have led journalism to lose the credibility it once enjoyed and become just another agent in the current communicative ecosystem. Although this does not mean that other agents will replace journalistic work (as they do not share the same objectives and ethical commitments to the common good), it could imply a shift of the audience towards other content to understand reality.

Main Actors in the Current Communicative Ecosystem

Within the current communicative ecosystem, social networks are among the key actors with whom journalists must share the informational stage. Platforms like X, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are now considered the primary competitors (or collaborators) of journalism and are the focus of numerous studies in the field of media studies (Campos-Freire *et al.*, 2016; Enguix Oliver, 2019; Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2021; Aramburú-Moncada, 2022). This is not surprising. According to the Digital News Report, 37 % of respondents use Facebook to access news, 31 % use YouTube and 21 % use Whatsapp, among other social networks (Interactive DNR 2024, n.d.). This again is coherent with the information revealed by the Edelman Trust Barometer, which indicates that

44 % of respondents trust in social networks as sources of information (2024 Edelman Trust Barometer, n.d.).

Social networks increase the dissemination capacity of information and allow journalists to build their personal brand through their accounts (Enguix Oliver, 2019). Media outlets also use these platforms to enhance their coverage and dissemination capabilities, as seen with the minute-by-minute updates on X. In fact, Spanish professionals view X, Facebook, and YouTube as the networks that have positively impacted their work the most (Campos-Freire *et al.*, 2016). However, these advantages turn into drawbacks when the demand for immediacy and the obsession with achieving good content positioning lead to errors, polarizations, and misinformation (Enguix Oliver, 2019; Ufarte Ruiz and Murcia Verdú, 2022).

As Ufarte Ruiz and Murcia Verdú (2022, p. 33) state, "the Internet and social networks are a breeding ground for data and stories to tell"[9]. Although social networks do not always create journalistic content per se, understood as content generated by a professional journalist working in or for a media outlet and adhering to the principles of truthfulness and verification, they certainly generate content. Some of the creators of this content position themselves as professionals fulfilling some functions attributed to journalism (Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2021; Maares and Hanusch, 2020). This claim, combined with their ability to reach massive audiences and the funding they receive from businesses and institutions (Micó *et al.*, 2022, p. 248), makes content creators another essential agent in the current communicative ecosystem. For example, the #MeToo movement on social media and the support from certain individuals has helped counteract the perception of rape culture within society (Armstrong and Mahone, 2021). In other words, content that is not traditionally journalistic has, through the unique opportunities offered by social media, succeeded in amplifying a previously marginalized social reality, allowing it to be heard in ways it had not been before.

In addition to social networks as content disseminators and creators using these networks to create content, sometimes with journalistic pretensions, public institutions and private companies have found an opportunity in the new digital world to create and disseminate their own narratives. The data supports this. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, a significant portion of the population in Spain does not trust businesses (49 %) or the government (36 %). However, 41 % believe that companies can address social challenges without being perceived as polarized, and 36 % of that 41 % think one key to achieving this is becoming a reliable source of information (2024 Edelman Trust Barometer, n.d.).

Finally, entertainment platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Movistar+, and HBO, along with social networks, are the major contenders for audience attention and money. According to the Digital News Report 2024, only 12 % of respondents in Spain say they subscribe to a news outlet (Newman, 2022).

9 Translated from Spanish.

In Spain, according to consulting firm Kantar, 66 % of Spanish households used a streaming platform in the third quarter of 2022. This 66 % (12.4 million households) accesses an average of 3.3 video-on-demand services, and 11 % use a minimum of six streaming platforms (Galindo, 2022). These platforms offer entertainment across almost all audiovisual genres: documentaries, reality TV, movies, and fictional series.

Of all these genres, only documentaries can be considered journalistic work (and perhaps not always). While any fiction can contribute to shaping the imaginary that guides the audience in their daily lives, and reality TV has a notable influence not only on the audience but also on the evolution of the television landscape (Aslama and Pantti, 2006; Penzhorn and Pitout, 2007; Deller, 2019), only fiction based in real events (as defined before) delve into telling stories whose characters have real names and surnames. In this sense, of all the content offered on streaming platforms (excluding documentaries, generally considered journalistic), only fiction based on real events can be considered direct competitors of journalism in the task of reporting what happens in the world. Following the example of the #MeToo movement on social media against sexual abuse, we could cite the based on real events drama *Unbelievable*. This miniseries, by fictionalizing a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative report, has not only achieved significant audience success but also contributed to challenging some of the most widespread myths about rape in society. It has done so precisely by filling gaps that journalism cannot address, areas that only fiction can reach and explore in depth (Gastón-Lorente and Gómez-Baceiredo, 2022a).

This is not to say that fiction based on real events can replace journalism or that they perform the same functions, adhere to the same ethical codes, or have the same reading pact with the audience. Absolutely not. Just as journalism competes with social networks, content creators, public institutions, and private companies for the audience's attention when it comes to discussing reality, so does fiction based on real events from its own perspective. And just as media studies examine how social networks, content creators, and the narratives of public institutions and private companies affect or intertwine with journalism and its functions, fiction based on real events should be studied for their relationship with journalism. After all, the journalist is just one of many actors participating in public communication in the current communicative ecosystem (Deuze, 2008), and it is worth determining if fiction based on real events is one of the accompanying agents.

THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE: FROM NEWS CONSUMPTION TO INFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

Some might argue that the audience's perspective is not as significant as that of journalists. After all, it is journalists who possess the knowledge, experience, and time to perform their functions. Often, as Costera Meijer (2013) notes, paying attention to audience preferences is even considered detrimental to journalistic quality. So, why should the audience have any say in the matter? Heise *et al*. state:

> Journalism provides a public service for which it needs an audience. This is true not only from an economic perspective: one basic understanding of the normative function of journalism is that the public relies on journalistic services to provide orientation within society and everyday life. Thus, journalists have to take into account information about their audience in order to produce news that will be noticed. As a consequence, the audience has always influenced journalistic practice (Heise, 2014, p. 411).

However, before the digital revolution, this influence stemmed from journalists' own deductions and intuitions rather than real-time knowledge of public preferences. Now, with a fragmented and increasingly autonomous audience and a digital environment where every visit, like, and second spent on a news article can be measured, journalists have begun to embrace the real opinions of audiences in their work (Tandoc and Ferrucci, 2017). Yet, metrics are not the best way to understand how the audience values journalistic performance (Costera Meijer, 2013). Indeed, using the time a user spends on an open news article can be counterproductive, as it does not indicate the quality of attention or the reader's interest in the content. For instance, a user might click on a news article and keep the tab open for days without ever reading it (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2020).

While these data may matter from an economic (what the audience is willing to pay for) or entertainment perspective (what makes them click on a news article), they overlook the normative interest in understanding the audience, as "journalism legitimizes itself in coherence with its democratic function and defense of civic freedoms that impact society" (Masip, 2014, p. 261). Thus, although the utility of metrics for studying consumer behaviours is not denied, information about the relationship between journalism and audience expectations is not found in measuring likes or time spent, but in asking what constitutes good journalism for the audience (Costera Meijer, 2013). In this sense, Swart *et al*. (2022) argue that in recent years, journalism studies have increasingly focused on the audience's perspective. Therefore, one can no longer say that journalism and communication research ignores it (Peters *et al*., 2022). However, Swart *et al*. (2022) believe the change has not been sufficient, as studies often focus on specific groups (particularly young people and those who avoid news consumption) while ignoring others deemed less attractive from a utilitarian perspective (e.g., lower socioeconomic groups expected to have less spending potential on information).

Swart *et al*. (2022) propose a more radical shift that requires accepting three uncomfortable truths. First, that journalists' output does not have to be meaningful to the audience. Second, the assumption that news consumption is inherently good for society and its avoidance is harmful is not evident and may not always be correct. Third, what the audience experiences as news sometimes exceeds the boundaries of news and even journalism. This third point is fundamental to this article. Swart *et al*. ask:

> If news does not equal journalism, this not only raises practical concerns for the journalistic profession. It also brings about more existential questions about the role and

> purpose of journalism studies as a field. What are journalism scholars to do, if from an audience perspective, journalism studies might not necessarily be about journalism? In other words, if journalism as an institution is no longer automatically the locus where audiences encounter what they experience as news, what does this mean for the object, boundaries, and aims of journalism studies? (Swart *et al*., 2022, p. 10).

In other words, if journalistic work is no longer the only piece the audience experiences as informative, if non-journalistic content serves as a total or complementary informational source, where are the boundaries of journalism studies?

Moe and Ytre-Arne (2022, p. 45) assert, "News is not the only thing citizens need to maintain their roles in a democracy". Similarly, Picone and Vandenplas (2022, p. 106) argue that the news repertoires audiences use to make sense of reality "are (...) integrated into broader media repertoires (...) that, along with informative content, also include fictional, political, and commercial content, shaping our window to the world".

But what if the audience does not differentiate the consumption of this fictional, political, or commercial content from news consumption? According to Costera Meijer (2007), young audiences experience news as just another genre in the content flow they consume and do not draw a strict boundary between information and entertainment. Banjac and Hanusch (2022) perceive a blurring of the boundaries the audience sets between journalists and content creators, and Wunderlich *et al*. (2022) state that younger audiences increasingly differentiate less between information produced by journalistic sources and that from other sources.

It seems that the current communicative ecosystem consists of a set of "blurry boundaries" (Loosen, 2015) —especially but not exclusively for young people— that can be studied in various ways and have different consequences. One of them, Loosen (2015) argues, is functional dedifferentiation, which not only implies that journalism's functions would no longer suffice to distinguish it from other digital environment actors but also suggests a partial or temporary loss of its functions. This does not mean journalism is indistinguishable from other actors like social networks or fiction based on real events, or that the audience is unaware of the difference between fiction and reality. On the contrary, as long as the debate about the boundaries between them continues, the differences will remain important (Loosen, 2015).

However, if functional dedifferentiation occurs, where other digital environment actors, through the narration of more or less current events, fulfil some historically attributed journalistic functions; if the audience increasingly blurs the line between information and entertainment, between content produced by journalists and that by content creators, what prevents these narrative agents from being studied or analysed within journalism studies?

This proposal does not intend for fiction based on real events to be studied as journalism or news because they are not journalism, nor do those who create them adhere to the same ethical code or reading pact. However, they could be studied, as Swart *et al*. (2022, p. 13) suggest, as an informative experience (they

refer to "what is experienced as informative", because what matters is not so much the news or its format but what the audience experiences as informative. Thus, the question would no longer be what citizens need from journalism but "what kind of information people need to orient themselves in society and everyday life" (Swart *et al.*, 2022, p. 16).

CONCLUSIONS

Through the theoretical approach undertaken in this article, it is concluded, as previously outlined in the introduction, that fictions based on real events should be examined within journalism studies as a form of informational experience. The justifications for this position are as follows:

1. Journalistic work and fiction based on real events coexist in the same communicative ecosystem where both compete for the audience's attention. It is an environment that citizens access through the same device —generally the smartphone— where all content can be consumed indistinctly and simultaneously.
2. Journalism is one agent among others in this ecosystem that faces a credibility crisis that has led to a loss of trust in the media by the audience. In this situation, other agents such as social networks, institutions, or fiction based on real events seem ready to take its place in making sense of reality.
3. Fiction based on real events is gaining more and more prominence in the current communicative ecosystem, becoming one of the star products of video-on-demand platforms. These fictions, on the rise due to their ability to reach large audiences, become a relevant agent —at least as much as others— in the task of telling real events, even though these events are fictionalized. In addition to the already mentioned *Unbelievable* (2018), other examples include *When They See Us* (2018), *Dopesick* (2021), *Painkiller* (2023), and, on a national level, *Fariña* (2018) or *El Caso Asunta* (2024). All of these series have achieved great success in terms of viewership and tackle some of the most significant topics or stories in the public sphere of contemporary society.
4. In this whirlwind of narratives and narrative agents, the audience, especially the younger one, seems not to differentiate and consumes news as just another element of the content flow at their disposal. Thus, everything indicates that fiction based on real events can constitute for the audience another element of this content flow and should therefore be considered a possible informative experience.

This consideration raises several dilemmas within journalism studies and questions what should be the object and objectives of study in this field (Swart *et al.*, 2022). If this type of fiction is studied from that perspective, issues arise regarding its ability to perform certain functions attributed to journalism (Gastón-Lorente *et al.*, 2024; Gastón-Lorente and Gómez Baceiredo, 2022a) or the risks of it becoming a narrator of reality (Gastón-Lorente and Gómez-Baceiredo, 2022b).

But there are also other ethical, legal, or even audience impact issues that are worth exploring from the perspective of journalism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank the Asociación Amigos de la Universidad de Navarra (Association of Friends of the University of Navarra) for their generous financial support during my PhD studies. Additionally, I am deeply grateful to my thesis advisors, Beatriz Gómez Baceiredo and Antonio Martínez Illán, for their invaluable guidance and support.

Lucía Gastón-Lorente. PhD in Communication and a graduate in Journalism and Philosophy at the University of Navarra. She currently works as a professor and researcher at the same university and investigates narratives of journalism and fiction based on real events in relation to violence, victims, and terrorism. She teaches classes on fiction and non-fiction writing.

References

Aramburú-Moncada, Lucía G. (2022). Prescriptores de noticias: La distribución de la información en la era digital. In Isaac López Redondo and Maritza Sobrados-León (Eds.), *Los peligros que acechan al periodismo* (pp. 131-163). Comunicación Social Ediciones y Publicaciones.

Armstrong, Cory L. and Mahone, Jessica (2021). #Metoo in practice: Revisiting social media's influence in individual willingness to mobilize against sexual assault. *Feminist Media Studies*, *23*(1), 185-198. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1944258

Aslama, Minna and Pantti, Mervi (2006). Talking alone: Reality TV, emotions and authenticity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 9*(2), 167-184. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549406063162

Augustine, Robi and Xavier, Sanju (2021). A critical study on Netflix docudrama 'The social dilemma'. *Media, Culture and Society*, *22*, 1-10.

Banjac, Sandra and Hanusch, Folker (2022). A question of perspective: Exploring audiences' views of journalistic boundaries. *New Media & Society, 24*(3), 705-723. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820963795

Barroso, Jaime (2005). Docudrama y otras formas en el límite de la ficción televisiva española. In María Luisa Ortega (Ed.), *Nada es lo que parece: Falsos documentales, hibridaciones y mestizajes del documental en España* (pp. 171-206). Ocho y medio.

Bazaco, Ángela; Redondo, Marta, and Sánchez-García, Pilar (2019). El clickbait como estrategia del periodismo viral: Concepto y metodología. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social,* 74, 94-115. https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2019-1323

Beckett, Charlie and Deuze, Mark (2016). On the role of emotion in the future of

journalism. *Social Media + Society*, *2*(3), 1-6. 205630511666239. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116662395

Brants, Kees and Haan, Yael de (2010). Taking the public seriously: Three models of responsiveness in media and journalism. *Media, Culture & Society*, *32*(3), 411-428. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443709361170

Camarero, Emma (2021). A media format on the rise. The journalistic investigation documentary on Netflix and Prime Video. *Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie), 17*(3), 415-425. http:doi.org/10.13187/me.2021.3.415

Campos-Freire, Francisco; Rúas-Araújo, José; López-García, Xosé, and Martínez-Fernández, Valentín A. (2016). Impacto de las redes sociales en el periodismo. *El Profesional de la Información, 25*(3), 449-457. https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2016.may.15

Casero-Ripollés, Andreu (2014). La pérdida de valor de la información periodística: Causas y consecuencias. *Anuario ThinkEPI*, *8*, 256-259.

Costera Meijer, Irene (2007). The paradox of popularity. *Journalism Studies, 8*(1), 96-116. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700601056874

Costera Meijer, Irene (2013). Valuable journalism: A search for quality from the vantage point of the user. *Journalism, 14*(6), 754-770. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884912455899

Deller, Ruth A. (2019). *Reality television: The TV phenomenon that changed the world*. Emerald Group Publishing.

Deuze, Mark (2008). Understanding journalism as newswork: How it changes, and how it remains the same. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture, 5*(2), 4-24. https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.61

Deuze, Mark and Witschge, Tamara (2018). Beyond journalism: Theorizing the transformation of journalism. *Journalism*, *19*(2), 165-181. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884916688550

Donnelly, Debra J. and Shaw, Emma L. (2020). Docudrama as 'histotainment': Repackaging family history in the digital age. *Public History Review*, *27*, 48-68. https://doi.org/10.3316/informit.605497052632919

Edelman Trust Barometer (2024). Edelman España. https://www.edelman.com.es/2024-edelman-trust-barometer

Enguix Oliver, Salvador (2019). Diez años de redes sociales y periodismo: Riesgos y retos en el ecosistema informativo del siglo XXI. *Dígitos. Revista de Comunicación Digital, 5*, 164-183. https://doi.org/10.7203/rd.v0i5.146

Farias Batlle, Pedro and Roses, Sergio (2009). La crisis acelera el cambio del negocio informativo. *Estudios sobre El Mensaje Periodístico*, *15*, 15-32.

Fernández Barrero, Ángeles (2022). Sintomatología de un periodismo necesario: Amenazas, creencias y oportunidades. In Isaac López Redondo and Maritza Sobrados-León (Eds.), *Los peligros que acechan al periodismo* (pp. 15-30). Comunicación Social Ediciones y Publicaciones.

Fernández-Santos, Elsa (2023, May). Adiós a la edad de oro de los documentales de plataforma. *El País*. https://elpais.com/cultura/2023-05-11/adios-a-la-edad-de-oro-de-los-documentales-de-plataforma.html

Fink, Katherine (2019). The biggest challenge facing journalism: A lack of trust. *Journalism*, *20*(1), 40-43. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918807069

Formenti, Cristina (2014). The sincerest form of docudrama: Re-framing the animated documentary. *Studies in Documentary Film, 8*(2), 103-115. https://doi.org/10.1080/17503280.2014.908491

Galindo, Cristina (2022, October). Siete de cada diez hogares españoles están suscritos a una plataforma de vídeo en 'streaming'. *El País*. https://elpais.com/economia/2022-10-26/siete-de-cada-diez-

hogares-espanoles-estan-suscritos-a-una-plataforma-de-video-en-streaming.html

García-Martínez, Alberto N. (2014). El fenómeno de la serialidad en la tercera edad de oro de la televisión. In Enrique Fuster (Ed.), *La figura del padre nella serialità televisiva* (pp. 19-40). EDUSC.

Gastón-Lorente, Lucía and Gómez-Baceiredo, Beatriz (2022a). Fiction as an ally to make journalism more believable: Rape, trauma and secondary victimization in the Netflix miniseries 'Unbelievable'. *Feminist Media Studies*, *23*(6), 2761-2779. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2084633

Gastón-Lorente, Lucía and Gómez-Baceiredo, Beatriz (2022b). El riesgo de la desinformación en la ficción basada en hechos reales: The thing about pam (o la cosa de justificar al criminal). *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*, *28*(4), 817-826.

Gastón-Lorente, Lucía; Gómez-Baceiredo, Beatriz, and Martínez-Illán, Antonio (2024). How fiction makes amends for journalism: The case of when they see us. *Journal of Communication Inquiry, 48*(3), 411-428. https://doi.org/10.1177/01968599221088265

Golden Globes (n.d.). Golden Globes. https://www.goldenglobes.com/homepage/season-variant

Groot Kormelink, Tim and Costera Meijer, Irene (2020). A user perspective on time spent: Temporal experiences of everyday news use. *Journalism Studies, 21*(2), 271-286. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2019.1639538

Heise, Nele; Loosen, Wiebke; Reimer, Julius, and Schmidt, Jan H. (2014). Including the audience. Comparing the attitudes and expectations of journalists and users towards participation in German TV news journalism. *Journalism Studies, 15*(4), 411-430. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2013.831232

Hoffer, Thomas W.; Musburger, Robert B., and Nelson, Richard A. (1985). Docudrama. In Brian G. Rose and Robert S. Alley (Eds.), *TV genres. A hanbook and reference guide* (pp. 188-211). Greenwood Press.

Hoffer, Thomas W. and Nelson, Richard A. (1978). Docudrama on American Television. *Journal of the University Film Association*, *30*(2), 21-27.

Hoffer, Thomas W. and Nelson, Richard A. (1980). Evolution of docudrama on American television networks: A content analysis, 1966-1978. *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, *45*(2), 149-163. https://doi.org/10.1080/10417948009372446

Hudelet, Ariane (2018). The wire and the democracy of fiction. *Series - International Journal of TV Serial Narratives*, *4*(2), 77-89. https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454X/8335

Hudelet, Ariane and Crémieux, Anne (2021). Introduction. In Ariane Hudelet and Anne Crémieux (Eds.), *Exploring seriality on screen. Audiovisual narratives in film and television* (pp. 1- 15). Routledge.

Interactive DNR 2024 (n.d.). Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/interactive

Iordache, Catalia; Raats, Tim, and Mombaerts, Sam (2022). The Netflix Original documentary, explained: Global investment patterns in documentary films and series. *Studies in Documentary Film, 0*(0), 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1080/17503280.2022.2109099

Kovach, Bill and Rosenstiel, Tom (2012). *Los elementos del periodismo*. Aguilar.

Lichtenstein, Dennis; Herbers, Martin R., and Bause, Halina (2021). Journalistic YouTubers and their role orientations, strategies, and professionalization tendencies. *Journalism Studies, 22*(9), 1103-1122. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1922302

Lipkin, Steven N. (2002). *Real emotional logic: Film and television docudrama as persuasive practice*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Lipkin, Steven N. (2011). *Docudrama performs the past: Arenas of argument in films based on true stories*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Loosen, Wiebke (2015). The notion of the "blurring boundaries". *Digital Journalism, 3*(1), 68-84. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.928000

Maares, Phoebe and Hanusch, Folker (2020). Exploring the boundaries of journalism: Instagram micro-bloggers in the twilight zone of lifestyle journalism. *Journalism, 21*(2), 262-278. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918801400

Márquez, Israel (2017). El smartphone como metamedio. *Observatorio* (OBS*), *11*(2), 61-71. https://doi.org/10.15847/obsOBS11220171033

Masip, Pere (2014). Audiencias activas, democracia y algoritmos. *El Profesional de la Información (Anuario ThinkEPI), 8*, 260-263.

Mayoral, Javier (2018). *Periodismo herido busca cicatriz*. Plaza y Valdés.

Micó, Josep L.; Casero-Ripollés, Andreu, and García-Orosa, Berta (2022). Platforms in Journalism 4.0: The impact of the fourth industrial revolution on the news industry. In Jorge Vázquez-Herrero, Alba Silva-Rodríguez, María Cruz Negreira-Rey, Carlos Toural-Bran and Xosé López-García (Eds.), *Total journalism: Models, techniques and challenges* (pp. 241-253). Springer International Publishing.

Moe, Hallvard and Ytre-Arne, Brita (2022). The democratic significance of everyday news use: Using diaries to understand public connection over time and beyond journalism. *Digital Journalism, 10*(1), 43-61. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2020.1850308

Newman, Nic (2022, June). Overview and key findings of the 2022 Digital News Report. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/dnr-executive-summary

Paget, Derek (2011). *No other way to tell it: Docudrama on film and television*. Manchester University Press.

Paget, Derek (2016). Introduction: A new Europe, the post-documentary turn and Ddcudrama. In Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Derek Paget (Eds.), *Docudrama on European television: A selective survey* (pp. 1-26). Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Pedregal, Alejandro (2019, August). 'Chernobyl' y el espectáculo como documento histórico. Contexto y Acción. http://ctxt.es/es/20190828/Culturas/27955/Alejandro-Pedregal-Chernobyl-serie-licencia-artistica-verosimilitud.htm

Penzhorn, Heidi and Pitout, Magriert (2007). A critical-historical genre analysis of reality television. *Communication, 33*(1), 62-76. https://doi.org/10.1080/02500160701398995

Peters, Chris; Schrøder, Kim C.; Lehaff, Josephine, and Vulpius, Julie (2022). News as they know it. Young adults' information repertoires in the digital media landscape. *Digital Journalism, 10*(1), 62-86. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1885986

Picone, Ike and Vandenplas, Ruben (2022). Windows to the world: Imagining Flemish news audiences and their views on society through the lens of news repertoires. *Digital Journalism, 10*(1), 87-108. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1972323

Raventós Mercadé, Carme; Torregrosa Puig, Marta, and Cuevas Álvarez, Efrén (2012). El docudrama contemporáneo: Rasgos configuradores. *Tripodos, 1*(29), 117-132.

Romero-Domínguez, Lorena R. (2020). Narrativas del crimen en los documentales de no ficción: Éxito del *true crime* en las plataformas VOD. *Revista Panamericana de Comunicación*, *2*(2), 11-20. https://doi.org/10.21555/rpc.v0i2.2332

Romero-Domínguez, Lorena R. (2021). Intersections between journalistic documentary and true crime in the context of VOD platforms: The Alcàsser murders as a

Spanish case study. In Julie B. Wiest (Ed.), *Mass mediated representations of crime and criminality* (pp. 71-90). Emerald Publishing Limited.

Rosenthal, Alan (1999). *Why docudrama? Fact-fiction on film and TV*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Rosenthal, Alan (2013). *From Chariots of Fire to The King's Speech: Writing biopics and docudramas*. SIU Press.

Sádaba-Chalezquer, Charo and Salaverría-Aliaga, Ramón (2022). *I Estudio sobre la desinformación en España*. https://dadun.unav.edu/handle/10171/63643

Sánchez de la Nieta, Miguel Á. (2016). *El renacimiento del periodismo: Nuevas tecnologías al servicio de su esencia*. EUNSA.

Swart, Joëlle; Groot Kormelink, Tim; Costera Meijer, Irene, and Broersma, Marcel (2022). Advancing a radical audience turn in journalism. Fundamental dilemmas for journalism studies. *Digital Journalism, 10*(1), 8-22. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.2024764

Tandoc, Edson C. and Ferrucci, Patrick R. (2017). Giving in or giving up: What makes journalists use audience feedback in their news work? *Computers in Human Behavior, 68*, 149-156. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.11.027

Television Academy (n.d.). https://www.emmys.com

Tyushka, Andriy (2022). Weaponizing narrative: Russia contesting EUrope's liberal identity, power and hegemony. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies, 30*(1), 115-135. https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2021.1883561

Ufarte Ruiz, María J. and Murcia Verdú, Francisco J. (2022). Riesgos y oportunidades del periodismo en tiempos de redes: ¿Hacia la devaluación de los criterios profesionales periodísticos? In Isaac López Redondo and Maritza Sobrados-León (Eds.), *Los peligros que acechan al periodismo* (pp. 31-48). Comunicación Social ediciones y publicaciones.

Vara-Miguel, Alfonso; Amoedo-Casais, Avelino; Moreno-Moreno, Elsa; Negredo-Bruna, Samuel, and Kaufmann-Argueta, Jürg (2022). *Digital News Report España 2022*. Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra.

Wahl-Jorgensen, Karin; Williams, Andrew; Sambrook, Richard; Harris, Janet; Garcia-Blanco, Iñaki; Dencik, Lina; Cushion, Stephen; Carter, Cynthia, and Allan, Stuart (2016). The future of journalism: Risks, threats and Opportunities. *Journalism Studies*, *17*(7), 801-807.

Woodhead, Leslie (1999). The Guardian Lecture: Dramatized Documentary. In Alan Rosenthal (Ed.), *Why docudrama? Fact-fiction on film and TV* (pp. 101-110). Southern Illinois University Press.

Wunderlich, Leonie; Hölig, Sascha, and Hasebrink, Uwe (2022). Does journalism still matter? The role of journalistic and non-journalistic sources in young peoples' news related practices. *The International Journal of Press/Politics, 27*(3), 569-588. https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211072547

Norms of Publication Tripodos

Plaça Joan Coromines| Barcelona 08001 | Tel. 93 253 31 98

Tripodos is an academic journal of international scope published by Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations, Ramon Llull University. Since 1996, the pages of this biannual publication have offered a forum for debate and critical discussion with regard to any discipline related to the world of communication: journalism, cinema, television, radio, advertising, public relations, the Internet, etc.

Review policy

All of the articles in the journal are evaluated by at least two experts using the blind peer-review system.

Submission of original articles

Tripodos accepts original articles which must not have been previously published nor be in the process of being evaluated for any other publication. The journal only accepts articles written in English.

In order to submit original papers, authors must be registered with the journal (www.tripodos.com) as authors. Following this step, authors must enter their user name and password, activated in the process of registering, and begin the submission process. In step 1, they must select the section "Monograph" or "Fundamentals".

Rules and instructions regarding the submission of originals can be downloaded at www.tripodos.com.

Proposals for monographs

Tripodos accepts proposals for monographs. The proposal must include a title, a summary of the objectives and topical content, the name of the coordinator's (or coordinators') institution, as well as a justification of the interest of the proposed monograph and of possible groups interested in participating. As a general rule, the monographs must contain a minimum of five articles and a maximum of seven.

The Editing Board of *Tripodos* will evaluate the proposals for monographic publications.

Both original articles and proposals for monographs must be sent to the following e-mail address: tripodos@blanquerna.url.edu.

Blanquerna
Universitat Ramon Llull
Facultat
de Comunicació
i Relacions Internacionals

Data on reception and acceptance of originals

Between July 2023 and December 2025, Tripodos received 158 manuscripts in total, 46 (29.10%) of which were accepted and 112 (70.90%) of which were rejected. During this same period, 39 articles were published, and a further 7 were accepted for publication after this period. All articles in this journal undergo a double-blind peer review system and are accepted by at least two experts.

To view the latest statistics on the reception and acceptance of manuscripts, as well as the list of reviewers for the period from September 2020 to June 2023, please refer to Issue 54 of the journal or the website.

From January 2026 onwards, statistics on the reception and acceptance of manuscripts, as well as the list of reviewers, will be compiled by calendar year and published in the first issue of the following year.

List of reviewers

Between July 2023 and December 2025, a total of 133 reviewers from various universities and countries served as reviewers for this journal. The reviewers who assessed articles for the journal during this period are listed below:

- Aliagas, Irene (Universidad Complutense de Madrid)
- Amo Filvà, Daniel (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Antenaza, Miguel (Universidad Peruana de Ciencias Aplicadas)
- Anyó, Lluís (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Aran, Sue (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Aranda Juárez, Daniel (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya)
- Arce García, Sergio Enrique (UNIR)
- Arias Robles, Félix (Universidad Miguel Hernández)
- Arnedo, Joan (TecnoCampus - Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya)
- Aspriadis, Neofytos (University of Patras)
- Baker, Carissa (University of Central Florida)
- Ballano Macías, Sonia (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Barrientos-Báez, Almudena (Universidad Complutense de Madrid)
- Bello, Valeria (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Berraquero, Diego (Universidad Católica de San Antonio de Murcia)
- Brittain-Hale, Amber (Pepperdine University)
- Busquet, Jordi (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Cano Tenorio, Rafael (Universidad de Cádiz)
- Carratalá, Adolfo (Universitat de València)
- Carrillo, Elena (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Chiaramonte, Xenia (Universidad Carlos III)
- Colom, Àngel (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Cordero, Lidia (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Cornejo Urbina, Franklin (Universidad Antonio Ruiz de Montoya)

- Corral, Maria Nieves (Universidad de Sevilla)
- Cortés Quesada, Jose Antonio (Escuela Superior de Comunicación Audiovisual)
- Cuartielles, Roger (Universitat Pompeu Fabra)
- de Frutos, Ruth Ainhoa (Universidad de Málaga)
- de Wulf Helskens, Maxine (Ghent University)
- Díaz Noci, Javier (Universitat Pompeu Fabra)
- Domínguez García, Ricardo (Universidad de Sevilla)
- Donstrup, Mayte (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos)
- Ek, Richard (Karlstad University)
- Escamilla Solano, Sandra (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos)
- Esparza, Daniel (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Etumnu, Emeka (Imo State University Owerri)
- Fernández Ruiz, Marta (CITM - Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya)
- Franch Puig, Pere (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Franquet, Miquel (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- García Panella, Òscar (ENTI - Universitat de Barcelona)
- García Ponce, Damián (Investigador independiente)
- Garrido Pintado, Pablo (Universidad Complutense de Madrid)
- Giacomelli, Fábio (University of Beira Interior)
- Gjesdal, Anje Müller (Østfold University College)
- Gómez, Iván (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Gómez Diago, Gloria (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos)
- González Díaz, Cristina (Universidad de Alicante)
- González Fernández, Sara (UNIR)
- Gonzálvez Vallés, Juan Enrique (Universidad Complutense de Madrid)
- Goulding, Stephen (University of Nottingham Ningbo China)
- Grau de Pablos, Tomás (CITM - Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya)
- Guallar, Javier (Universitat de Barcelona)
- Guerra Heredia, Sergio (Universidad de Málaga)
- Gultekin Akcay, Zeynep (Sivas Cumhuriyet University)
- Herrera Sánchez, Sonia (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya)
- Hidalgo Cobo, Pablo (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos)
- Jiménez Gómez, Isidro (Universidad Complutense de Madrid)
- Larrondo, Ainara (Universidad del País Vasco)
- Lee, Chun-wing (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University)
- Legerén Lago, Beatriz (Universidade de Vigo)
- LeBrun Keswani, Kelsey (University of Lisbon)
- Liu, Zixiu (Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University)
- Ljubicic, Ruzica (University at Mostar)
- Lomas Martínez, Santiago (Universidad de Salamanca)
- Longhi, Ludovico (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)
- López García, Xosé (Universidad de Santiago de Compostela)
- López Golán, Mónica (Universidade da Coruña)
- López Rabadán, Pablo (Universitat Jaume I)
- López-Cantos, Francisco (Universitat Jaume I)
- López-del Castillo Wilderbeek, Francisco Leslie (Universitat Pompeu Fabra)
- López-Marcos, Casandra (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos)
- Majeed, Tawseef (Jamia Millia Islamia)
- Mancinas Chávez, Rosalba (Universidad de Sevilla)
- Marín Tapiero, Jorge Iván (Universidad de Medellin)

- Mascuki, Masduki (Universitas Islam Indonesia)
- Massa, Alessandra (Sapienza Università di Roma)
- Mateos, Oscar (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Mateos-Pérez, Javier (Universidad Complutense de Madrid)
- McCroy, Amy (Ulster University)
- Méndez González, Ramon (Universidade de Vigo)
- Mendez Muros, Sandra (Universidad de Sevilla)
- Mendoza Michilot, María (Universidad de Lima)
- Meso, Koldo (Universidad del País Vasco)
- Micó, Josep Lluís (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Miotto, Giorgia (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Mistiaen, Valériane (Université libre de Bruxelles)
- Morejón Llamas, Noemi (Loyola University)
- Murcia, Alberto (Universidad Carlos III)
- Muro, Pilar (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Navarro Remesal, Víctor (TecnoCampus - Universitat Pompeu Fabra)
- Negreira Rey, Maria Cruz (Universidade de Santiago de Compostela)
- Noguera Vivo, José Manuel (Universidad Católica San Antonio de Murcia)
- Obaid, Saddam A. (National Defence University of Malaysia)
- Oleinik, Anton (Memorial University)
- Palao Errando, José Antonio (Universitat Jaume I)
- Palau, Dolors (Universitat de València)
- Parrat Fernández, Sonia (Universidad Complutense de Madrid)
- Peña Fernández, Simón (Universidad del País Vasco)
- Pérez Curiel, Concha (Universidad de Sevilla)
- Pérez Zapata, Ana Beatriz (TecnoCampus - Universitat Pompeu Fabra)
- Pochapska, Oksana (Kamianets-Podilskyi Ivan Ohiienko National University)
- Pons López, Joan J. (TecnoCampus - Universitat Pompeu Fabra)
- Ptaszek, Grzegorz (AGH University of Krakow)
- Puertas Graell, David (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Ramírez Plascencia, David (Universidad de Guadalajara)
- Rivas de Roca, Rubén (Universidade de Santiago de Compostela)
- Rodríguez, Leticia (Universidad de Cádiz)
- Roe, Jasper (James Cook University Singapore)
- Roger-Monzón, Vanessa (Universitat de València)
- Saba, Claudia (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Sabaté, Alba (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Said-Hung, Elías Manuel (Universidad Internacional de la Rioja)
- Salido Fernández, Juana (Universidad de Granada)
- Santamaría, Sara García (University of Bristol)
- Sidorenko Bautista, Pavel (Universidad Internacional de La Rioja)
- Sintes-Olivella, Marçal (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Sora Domenjó, Carles (CITM - Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya)
- Suau, Jaume (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Tapia Frade, Alejandro (Universidad de Cádiz)
- Tarrassa Torres, Mateo (Universidad Católica de Valencia)
- Tasenţe, Tănase (Ovidius University)
- Tatay, Jaime (Universidad Pontificia de Comillas)
- Tiripelli, Giuliana (De Montfort University)
- Torres Romay, Emma (Universidade de Vigo)
- Valmora, Gogo (Kolegji Universitar Bedër)
- Varona Aramburu, David (Universidad Complutense de Madrid)
- Vázquez-Herrero, Jorge (Universidade de Santiago de Compostela)

- Vicente Tena, Lidia (Universitat Jaume I)
- Vinader Segura, Raquel (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos)
- Wozniak, Antal (University of Liverpool)
- Xicoy Comas, Enric (Universitat Ramon Llull)
- Yaguache, Jenny Jovita (Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja)

Blanquerna
Universitat Ramon Llull
Facultat
de Comunicació
i Relacions Internacionals