The cultural value of digital games and play

by

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Summary

Historically, digital game play has been a marginalised activity, often presented in the mainstream media as trivial, wasteful, or dangerous. In more recent years, McKernan's (2013) analysis of *New York Times* coverage suggests that digital games do appear to have become more accepted and legitimate in the eyes of the mainstream media. However, the process of digital play's cultural valuing and legitimation is complex and ongoing. This study explores the cultural value placed on digital games and play by analysing discursive constructions of games, players, and the act of play in mainstream newspapers and enthusiast game websites from the US, UK, Canada, and Australia from December 2013 to June 2014. These publications' coverage of digital games and play is analysed using a critical discourse analysis methodology, specifically van Leeuwen's (2008) approach to discourses as recontextualisations of social practice. Additionally, the Bourdieusian concepts of 'gaming's field' (Kirkpatrick 2013) and 'gaming capital' (Consalvo 2007) are used to explore the cultural value ascribed to digital games and play in these publications. As influential participants in gaming's field, these publications both reflect and shape the way games are understood and valued.

This study finds that these publications construct the value of games and play in broadly contrastive ways. Newspaper coverage legitimises digital play by highlighting its instrumental benefits to other cultural fields, especially the fields of health and education, as well as taking an interest in the economic value of the game industry. Meanwhile, enthusiast websites seek to legitimise games on their own terms according to internal, autonomous forms of value in gaming's field; games are variously constructed and valued as artistic creations, as fun and immersive media, and as evolving technology with immanent potential. However, these general strategies of legitimation are heavily qualified and conditional. In newspaper coverage, game-playing audiences are overwhelmingly constructed as young and male, meaning any grounds of legitimacy can only be said to apply for this narrow audience rather than others. Furthermore, while newspaper coverage legitimises instrumental digital play, it continues to present pleasurable play as unproductive or harmful, especially for certain categories of game players, such as women and children. In particular, persistent anxieties concerning 'addiction' and health impacts continue to feature in newspaper

coverage of young people's digital play. Meanwhile, enthusiast game websites, in seeking to establish the autonomous values of gaming's field, engage in discursive gatekeeping which privileges certain games and platforms over others. The values of the field are constructed around games and platforms associated with a traditional young and male enthusiast audience, to the exclusion of possible new audiences. This is especially evident in the contrasting coverage of mobile games, which are devalued as overly-commercialised, and virtual reality games, which are heralded as the potential realisation of enthusiasts' dreams.

Ultimately, this study finds that as digital games occupy an increasingly prominent place in the cultural landscape, important struggles continue over the meaning and value of games and play. The process of cultural legitimation is not straightforward and linear, but uneven and contested, with some games, players, and platforms legitimised ahead of others in media publications. These ongoing struggles have important implications for the cultural valuing of digital games and play.

Declaration

This thesis presents work carried out by myself and does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; to the best of my knowledge it does not contain any materials previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; and all substantive contributions by others to the work presented, including jointly authored publications, are clearly acknowledged.

John Pike 17 February 2020

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Introduction

When this study began in 2014, the issue of the cultural positioning of digital games was at an interesting point where it seemed as though common negative perceptions of games had begun to shift. Previous decades had been filled with media coverage that seemed to either blame games for various social ills or otherwise simply treat them as a baffling curiosity. To someone who enjoyed playing games, the public discourse about them was often frustrating. However, there was some indication that this public discourse had started to change. In Australia, this was perhaps most clearly evident from a significant modification to the country's media classification legislation in 2013. For a long time in Australia, discourses around the cultural status of games had been closely connected to debates over an R18+ rating for games, which had been excluded from the country's classification system when legislation was introduced in the mid-1990s. This had led to numerous games being essentially banned from sale in the country, including high-profile titles such as *Grand Theft Auto III* (DMA Design 2001) and *Mortal Kombat* (NetherRealm Studios 2011). Unsurprisingly, this was a situation that angered many Australian players and frustrated the industry. As game scholar Daniel Golding (2013, p. 1) notes, the missing R18+ rating for games was 'one of the key regimes of discourse surrounding videogames in Australia' from around 1993 to 2013. It seemed clear that the denial of the rating in the classification system over that time period meant that, at least among politicians and other decision makers, games were essentially considered children's toys and playing them was seen as uniquely dangerous to those young players[1]. No evidence existed to support either perception, but the eventual introduction

[1] Still today, the Australian classification legislation states that, because games are 'interactive', they 'may have a higher impact than similarly themed depictions of the classifiable elements in film'

of an R18+ rating in 2013 nonetheless took many years of agitation by players and the Australian game industry. The zeal with which players voiced their opinion—over 58,000 submissions to a 2010 government inquiry into the proposed rating, of which 98% were in favour, and over 89,000 signatures on a petition, making it the largest petition in Australia at the time (Golding 2013)—suggested the issue had taken on a broader significance. It was not just a question of wanting to avoid censorship; the issue was symbolic of the cultural status of games.

In 2013 the R18+ rating was finally established. This was such a notable event because it seemed to indicate not just a material change to how games were rated, and therefore bought and sold, but also a discursive shift regarding games in Australia. If the lack of an R18+ rating suggested games were considered children's toys, the addition of the rating seemed to confirm that perception had changed. There were additional reasons to think the cultural acceptance of games had shifted too. Digital games were certainly more *visible* than ever before; the global game industry had grown considerably in size and revenue, and the average age of game players being over 30 had been touted by industry groups for some time. The widespread adoption of smartphones and the rapid growth of 'casual' games had opened up digital play to new audiences; Jesper Juul (2010, p. 152) has argued that the growth of casual games helps to normalise digital play, and 'video games are fast becoming games for *everyone*'[2]. The growth of casual games on mobile devices allows for 'ambient play' (Hjorth 2018), further increasing the

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(*Guidelines for the classification of computer games 2012*). This assumption was first introduced into the legislation in the 1990s and is not informed by any research or evidence, as was pointed out by the Australian industry group Interactive Games and Entertainment Association in its submission to a government inquiry into an R18+ rating (IGEA 2010).

[2] Juul's general point remains valid, but the eruption of gamergate in August 2014 soon complicated any notion that games are 'for everyone'. Gamergate was essentially a campaign of abuse and harassment directed at especially women working in and around games and perpetuated by self-identified gamers who saw 'their' games and identities as under threat. These gamers often objected to what they described as 'politics' entering games, which in practice meant more awareness of issues such as sexism and racism. Attempts to make game development and game communities more inclusive was interpreted by these gamers as a threat to their previous dominance over these spaces. A clear explanation of the specific causes and initial escalation of gamergate is provided by Golding and van Deventer (2016, pp. 133-149).

visibility of games. The *Digital Australia 2014* report, part of a series that tracks digital play practices and attitudes in Australia, posited 'the ascendancy of computer and video games to centre stage in media culture' (Brand, Lorentz & Mathew 2014, p. 3). Beyond the production and use of digital games specifically, the act of *play* seems increasingly pervasive in various contexts as well. As some scholars have argued, the ubiquity of digital media gives our daily interactions an inherent playfulness. Frissen et al. (2015, p. 36), recalling Raessens' (2006) earlier observations about the 'ludification of culture' and the formation of playful identities, argue that digital media 'is implicitly prefiguring our experiences and actions in a playful way'. Similarly, Sicart (2014, p. 99) sees play and computation as 'fellow travelers' and calls for an attitude of playfulness in our interactions with the world, arguing that play is a 'portable tool for being' (p. 2). Zimmerman (2014) uses the term 'the ludic century' to argue we are in a time when the flexibility of digital networks has made information itself playful. Walz and Deterding (2014) prefer the term 'the gameful world' to discuss how games and game design express and shape culture. Games and play, specifically in their digital forms, are thus seemingly ubiquitous.

However, visibility is one thing; legitimacy is something else. As Golding and van Deventer (2016, p. 51) note, 'even though the vast majority of people play games, this doesn't mean that games are valued or respected'. These writers, a game scholar and a game developer respectively, 'admit that it's embarrassing to fess up that we like games sometimes' (p. 51). Further to this issue of 'embarrassment', in 2013 game journalist Ben Kuchera wrote an article about 'the stigma of being an open gamer', in which he quoted readers who felt embarrassed discussing digital games. Another journalist, Simon Parker (2017), has described the 'guilt' and 'shame' of being a videogame critic, and game developer Keith Burgun (2012) has written about 'game shame', the belief that games are not 'a legitimate interest in the way that films or music are'. It is hard to reconcile the idea that games are more visible and widely played than ever with the fact that even some people who make a career from them feel 'shame'. It is this kind of ambiguity, which I had also felt personally, that motivated this study. Clearly the issue of games' cultural status is a complex one that cannot be adequately addressed with simplistic narratives. The parallel historical processes of legitimation regarding other media forms is enough to suggest this complexity too. Analyses of film, television, and

comics have pointed to factors such as institutional recognition and the status of creators as auteurs as being important to the legitimation of those media forms (Allen & Lincoln 2004; Ndalianis 2011; Newman & Levine 2012). The fact that vast numbers of people watch television, for example, does not tell us much about whether and why television is considered a culturally legitimate form of media. Likewise, any suggestion that games are more accepted today also needs to look beyond their popularity and ask why this might be.

Furthermore, it should not be assumed that anxieties about digital games have suddenly disappeared in the past few years. There is plenty to suggest they have not. For example, a 2017 economics paper claimed the reason why young men in the United States work fewer hours than they used to is because they prefer to play videogames instead (Aguiar et al. 2017). The claim was enthusiastically covered by the *New York Times* (Bui 2017), *CBS News* (Picchi 2017), *Vox* (Campbell 2017), and the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Martin 2017), among others. The suggestion that the economy is harmed because young men—and here we see the gendered aspect of the 'gamer' stereotype, which will be explored in detail in this study—are too busy playing videogames fits easily with the perception that playing games is a 'wasteful' pastime. Even the tradition of blaming games for real world violence is evidently not over, with US President Donald Trump criticising 'gruesome and grisly videogames' in the wake of a shooting in El Paso, Texas, in August 2019. While Trump's criticism in this case was used as a political distraction (Bogost 2019), it was made discursively possible by the long history of games being used as scapegoats in such circumstances (Copenhaver 2020). While it is easy to assume that these perceptions will fade with time, this is not guaranteed, and regardless it is not a fast process. Indeed, to return to the debates around the Australian R18+ rating for games, Golding (2013) points out that the key rhetorical move on the part of the rating's advocates was to accept their opponents' claim that young people need to be protected. The lack of R18+, advocates argued, was resulting in violent games being released in Australia with the lower MA15+ rating, so the higher rating would help keep them away from apparently vulnerable 15- to 17-year-olds. Rather than the R18+ rating reflecting a shift in attitudes, it was introduced on the same discursive basis that had prevented its introduction for decades. Golding's analysis is a

clear demonstration of why a close analysis of discourse is needed for a more informed understanding of how games are culturally constructed and positioned.

One of this study's key foundational ideas is that there is nothing 'natural' about the process of valuing games and establishing their place in culture. Games do not legitimise themselves. Instead, it is individuals, groups, and institutions that work to do this, and they each have their own interests and goals. That is why the study of how games and play are valued is important; it is not just a question of *how* they are valued, but also what motivates and underlies this valuing. Given the history of negative and sometimes overblown media coverage of digital games, for this study it was decided to analyse how games are discursively constructed in media coverage in order to learn what kind of value is ascribed to them. It is reasonable to assume that coverage in mainstream media sources would differ from coverage in enthusiast game media, and so this study explores both. The mainstream publications analysed in this study are the following English-language newspapers from four Western countries: *The New York Times* (US), *Los Angeles Times* (US), *Daily Mail* (UK), *The Sun* (UK), *Toronto Star* (Canada), *Vancouver Sun* (Canada), *Herald Sun* (Australia), and the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia). The enthusiast game publications analysed are: *Gamespot* (US), *Polygon* (US), *Eurogamer* (UK), and *GamesIndustry.biz* (UK). These publications are analysed to answer the following research questions:

> What kinds of cultural value are placed on digital games and play in media discourse in the English-speaking Global West, and how are these values constructed in the discourses used to discuss digital games?
>
> How do these discourses and values of digital games and play differ between mainstream and enthusiast media?

To answer these questions, a critical discourse analysis methodology is used, specifically Van Leeuwen's (2008) framework which sees discourses as recontextualised social practices. This methodology is used because the process of valuing and legitimising games and play is a linguistic one involving justifications of objects and practices according to specific institutional orders (Van Leeuwen 2007, pp.

91-92). In this study, analysing processes of legitimation or delegitimation involves exploring how games and play are deemed to fit in, or not fit in, with the 'usual' way of doing things, which is always specific to the context. Further discussion of the choice of publications and of Van Leeuwen's analytical framework is provided in Chapter 2's discussion of this study's methodology. This follows Chapter 1's literature review, which discusses previous research on the discursive construction of digital games, players, and the practice of play. Because this study uses Pierre Bourdieu's field theory extensively, the literature review also describes and discusses this theory, including the concepts of 'gaming's field' and 'gaming capital', which are used in this thesis to analyse the ways in which games and play are positioned and valued.

Before getting to the central question of how digital games and play are valued, Chapter 3 begins this study's analysis by exploring newspaper coverage of games and addresses an important initial question: who is actually represented as a game player in newspaper coverage? This analysis shows a striking imbalance, with young male players massively overrepresented at the expense of other kinds of players, including women and older players. This imbalance in mainstream news discourse reinforces normative constructions of the young male game player identity, with other kinds of players such as women and older players positioned on the periphery of games. However, while digital play is constructed as a 'normal' activity for young men and boys to engage in, it is not necessarily presented as a *legitimate* one. The chapter's analysis shows how young people's digital play is constructed as inherently harmful to these players' mental and physical health. The specific aspects of play that feature in these constructions are its apparent immersiveness, addictiveness, and escapism. Because these aspects of play feature prominently in enthusiast discourse as desirable, the chapter identifies these contrasting constructions of pleasurable play as a key tension between mainstream and enthusiast discourses of games.

While digital play is constructed as inherently harmful to young players, it is also legitimised in specific circumstances, including for this same category of players. Thus Chapter 4 continues the analysis of newspaper coverage by exploring how play performed for instrumental purposes—beyond the pleasure of play itself—is constructed as valuable for the players and for society more broadly. Play performed for

educational and health benefits and as a form of work features prominently in newspaper coverage, and the chapter identifies these 'productive' forms of play as key to their legitimation in these mainstream news sources. Play is legitimised when it is performed in service of already-legitimised goals, namely productivity and self-improvement, so these instrumental uses therefore align digital play with wider capitalist power structures. Drawing on theories of play, the chapter argues that this represents a co-option of play in the service of power, with gamification practices being the prime example of play being repurposed for 'productive' ends. Together, Chapters 3 and 4 detail the construction of digital play as an inherently harmful activity which is redeemed when put to productive uses.

Following these chapters' analysis of how digital play as a social practice is constructed, Chapter 5 shifts the focus to the value ascribed to digital games as cultural artefacts. Exploring both the newspaper and enthusiast media sources, and drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, the chapter analyses how digital games are positioned in 'gaming's field'. These publications and their writers, as participants in the field and with an interest in their own 'gaming capital', variously seek to value games economically, technologically, and artistically. The chapter considers these claims to value in the context of the struggle for autonomy in gaming's field; that is, enthusiasts seek to establish the value of games in ways specific to the field. The claims of value identified in these publications are therefore often in conflict. Economic worth, which features mainly in the newspaper sources, appeals to measures of value external to the field, whereas the artistic discourse of games expressed by enthusiasts seeks to disavow the importance of economic success. Furthermore, the artistic discourse overtly disavows the importance of 'fun', leading to a key tension between common ways of constructing games in enthusiast publications: as fun entertainment on the one hand, and an art form on the other. From this analysis, the chapter discusses how all these ways of valuing games function as counters to negative cultural perceptions of them; rather than wasteful trivialities, games are constructed as economically productive, or as serious art, and so on. In this way, struggles to overcome negative perceptions of games continue to shape the ways in which they are valued.

To more deeply explore tensions resulting from the various ways games are valued, Chapters 6 and 7 look specifically at two forms of games and game platforms that have emerged relatively recently: mobile games and virtual reality. These two forms of games are significant because they are constructed, especially among enthusiasts, in dramatically different ways. Chapter 6 analyses how the enthusiast publications devalue mobile games as overly-commercialised, uncreative, and low-quality, with the 'free-to-play' business model at the core of these criticisms. The chapter further identifies the discursive categories of 'casual' and 'core' as central to the construction of mobile games against the more legitimised console and PC platforms. Casual and core are used to refer to games as well as their players, and the chapter analyses how the gatekeeping of 'authenticity' vis-à-vis mobile games carries a heavily gendered aspect that reinforces an exclusionary value hierarchy.

Chapter 7's analysis of the coverage of virtual reality in newspapers and enthusiast publications shows that, in stark contrast to mobile games, VR is constructed as 'the dream' of enthusiasts. Whereas mobile games are devalued as overly-commercialised and uncreative, VR is hailed as innovative and 'the future' of games. However, the analysis shows a significant shift in the coverage of VR in the enthusiast websites following Facebook's acquisition of virtual reality company Oculus VR. Prior to this acquisition, enthusiast publications sought to establish the autonomy of gaming's field around the promise and potential of VR. Oculus VR was invested with authenticity as a game technology company interested in delivering the 'dream' of fully immersive games. These attempts to establish the field's autonomy were thwarted once Facebook, a social media company with a history of hosting 'casual' games on its platform, seemed to take command of the push for consumer VR technology. The coverage in enthusiast publications becomes much more sceptical of VR following this acquisition, showing that the perceived 'ownership' of VR is key to its positioning as a legitimised game platform among enthusiasts. Together, Chapters 6 and 7 show that legitimacy and value do not apply simply to digital games as a homogenous category; instead, there are significant tensions between the positioning of specific games, platforms, and players, with implications for which are deemed to 'belong' and which are not.

Across all these chapters, this thesis identifies the various complexities and tensions involved in the processes of valuing and legitimising digital games and play at a point in time when they are becoming increasingly pervasive in culture. The analysis shows how games and play are legitimised in newspaper coverage according to capitalist values, specifically the importance of economic productivity, while at the same time enthusiasts seek to resist this positioning by establishing the value of games in alternative ways specific to gaming's field. These are important struggles, as all these publications are influential in how games are constructed and understood, how this media form is situated in culture, and how certain games, platforms, and players come to be seen as more 'authentic' than others.

1 Literature review

Game scholar Paolo Ruffino (2018, p. 9) describes the game industry as 'experiencing an identity crisis', in that previous, apparently solid ways of understanding games—as entertainment software aimed at an expected young white male audience—are today being disrupted. New audiences and new uses for games are changing the way the medium is understood—although Ruffino importantly notes that these are not necessarily 'new' but rather more visible today. In the midst of this uncertainty, Ruffino calls for 'creative game studies', which at its core is a critical approach that aims to answer how knowledge about games is produced (Ruffino 2018, pp. 19-27). This is essentially what this thesis contributes to by analysing discursive constructions of the value of digital games and play in both mainstream and enthusiast media publications. This first chapter's literature review begins with an overview of the various ways scholars have conceptualised the cultural value of digital games and play. It then outlines previous research on the discursive construction of games in media publications, as well as constructions of player and 'gamer' identities. Because a common feature of media discourses of digital play has been its supposed 'triviality', the literature review also outlines arguments advanced by game studies scholars on digital play's 'productivity', which is a significant issue in the present study's analysis. The literature review concludes with an explanation of Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, which is used in this study to help understand struggles over the value and legitimacy of games and play in 'gaming's field'.

The value of digital games and play

While comments about the cultural value of digital games are frequently made in various contexts, such as newspaper articles, academic writing, and among game developers and players, there have not been many detailed studies on the subject. Digital game researchers Consalvo and Paul (2013) suggest that the establishment of the distinct scholarly field of game studies has resulted in assumptions about the worth of games rather than an actual examination of their perceived worth:

> What [the early work of establishing game studies] has meant in practice is that few sustained interrogations into the discourses surrounding games' legitimacy have taken place. Games are presumed to be valid forms of entertainment—because to believe otherwise would call into question the value of the larger enterprise (Consalvo & Paul 2013, p. 3).

Game studies researcher Adrienne Shaw (2010) notes that much discourse about digital games, both academic and in the media, discusses the impact of games on other aspects of culture (she mentions national culture, media culture and sports culture), which has the effect of positioning games as a cultural outlier—as something separate and distinct from, rather than an integral part of, culture. Popular histories of the medium, such as Herz (1997) and Donovan (2010), also tend to present games as culturally disruptive, often painting a picture of new and distinct subcultures of players in arcades or in the living room. The various impacts or uses of games—such as social, cultural, medical, and educational—are popular areas of research, but there has only been a small number of studies of the discursive construction of games and play, as will be discussed below.

In recent years some academic arguments have been advanced regarding the value of games and play to society, some of which were briefly mentioned in the introduction. For example, Sicart (2014) reflects on play's role in society and conceptualises it as a mode of expression, 'a way of being in the world' (p. 7). For Sicart, play is what matters, not games as such, which he suggests are just one manifestation of play among many (Sicart 2014, p. 84). In this, he takes a different approach from many game scholars who have argued for the importance of games in modern societies. For example, in a short manifesto Zimmerman (2014, pp. 19-22) has argued that the twenty-

first century is a ‘ludic century’ in that it is ‘an era of games’. Zimmerman argues that playing games engenders a ‘gaming literacy’, which is important for identifying and playing with the systems that structure the world, and he suggests this gaming literacy will help ‘address our problems’. While this sounds somewhat similar to McGonigal’s (2011) argument that games can ‘fix reality’ and ‘help change the real world’ (pp. 346-7) by leveraging the fun of play to address social issues, McGonigal’s argument implies that games can be used to solve issues within existing social structures. For example, she suggests that games can be used to promote happiness without seeming to question systemic causes of unhappiness. In contrast, Zimmerman’s argument about playing with systems and thinking like a designer seems to imply the importance of changing those systems. Walz and Deterding (2014) have also addressed the significance of games and play in people’s lives in an edited volume titled *The Gameful World* (in which Zimmerman’s manifesto is published). These authors identify trends around the ‘ludification of culture’, meaning the increased presence and importance of games and play in people’s lives, and the ‘cultivation of ludus’, meaning the use of games for various purposes beyond pure entertainment. The concept of the ‘gameful world’ is thus a broadening of the concept of ‘gamification’, which is discussed further below as a ‘productive’ engagement with games and play. Along somewhat similar lines to the above authors, Frissen et al. (2015) also use the term ‘ludification’ to discuss how digital media cultures have become playful. This includes playing digital games, but playfulness also extends to other domains and activities; the authors mention various leisure activities, as well as traditionally ‘serious’ activities such as work, education, politics, and warfare (Frissen et al. 2015, p. 9). These authors’ particular interest is in how the ludification of these various activities shapes individual and cultural identities.

One of the strong threads of research and argument in game studies has been the fundamental question of what it means to engage in play with computing systems. The player-game relationship is examined by a number of game and other media scholars who consider games to be cybernetic in nature (Dovey & Kennedy 2006; Friedman 2006; Galloway 2006; Giddings 2005; Keogh 2018; Lahti 2003; Lister et al. 2009). An important text in this tradition is Aarseth’s (1997) study of ‘ergodic literature’, meaning texts which require ‘nontrivial effort’ from readers to traverse (p. 1). Aarseth sees a ‘cybertext’ as a machine comprised of signs, a medium, and an operator. Galloway

(2006) also uses the language of 'operator' and 'machine' to describe the cybernetic relationship between players and games, stating that the act of playing a game involves 'both organic and nonorganic actors' (p. 5). Giddings (2005) likewise grants a kind of agency to the machine, suggesting that when we play a game we treat its systems as though they have human-like beliefs and desires. A dissenting view here comes from Kirkpatrick (2011, pp. 150-151), who argues that this 'post-human' perspective does not allow for the human motivations involved in play; people want to do something with an object, and conceptualising game play as a circuit removes that element.

The role of the 'machine' is certainly important to how digital play has generally been understood, as it incorporates the technological nature of games as well the processes of feedback involving player actions and machine reactions. Games are thus seen as participatory, technological, dialogic (or communicative; Härig 2012), and disruptive in that they blur traditional categories like author/reader (Aarseth 1997). Beyond an understanding of games themselves, a cybernetic characterisation of games also has implications for the value of play in an increasingly ludic or playful culture that relies on digital technology—or an 'everyday, actual technoculture', in Giddings' (2005, 2014) words. Lahti (2003, p. 158) expresses this succinctly when he argues that 'video games epitomize a new cyborgian relationship with entertainment technologies, linking our everyday social space and computer technologies to virtual spaces and futuristic technologies'. As this quote suggests, conceptualising games as cybernetic raises the metaphorical figure of the cyborg, particularly as examined in the feminist approach of Donna Haraway (1991), who sees the cyborg figure as a way of escaping conceptual dualisms. Along the same lines, the cyborgian player-game relationship implies the disruptive nature of games, and a number of game studies scholars have explored how digital games blur traditional distinctions like author/reader and producer/consumer (Aarseth 1997), along with real/virtual (Calleja 2014), subject/object (Giddings 2005, invoking Latour's actor-network theory), and work/play (Pearce 2006; Yee 2006). In the way players control and customise game avatars, they play with identities, subjectivities and genders (Lin & Wang 2014; Taylor 2006; Williams, Kennedy & Moore 2011). Galloway (2006, p. 106) sees games as 'allegories for our contemporary life under the protocological network of continuous informatic control', suggesting that games can help us understand our modern political realities by allowing us to play with

these systems of control. Friedman (2006) states that playing a game involves 'learning to think like a computer'—though new media theorist Lev Manovich (2000, p. 61) makes a somewhat different argument here, suggesting that interactive media ask users to 'follow the mental trajectory of the new media designer' rather than the computer itself as Friedman says. Zimmerman's (2014) suggestion that games promote 'systems literacy' by allowing players to manipulate and explore them has much in common with this way of understanding game play.

Conceptualising games in these cybernetic and cyborgian ways has been influential in game studies, and one effect has been to emphasise differences between games and other media. This allows space for considering the cultural value placed on digital games and play. It is easy to see how an understanding of digital play as a circuitous entwinement with computers connects with anxieties expressed in media coverage—which will be explored in detail in this thesis—about people becoming 'obsessed' with screens and devices. In addition, the prevalent concept of 'gameplay' in enthusiast game discourse involves a continuous back-and-forth process of player input and machine feedback, and as Kirkpatrick (2013) has outlined, the development of this term has been significant in establishing digital games as distinct objects with their own meanings and forms of value. Of course, conceptualising digital games and play as cybernetic remains just one way of understanding them, and this thesis is concerned with the various ways in which games and play are constructed in media discourse. The following section reviews previous research that has explored discursive constructions of games in various publications and time periods.

Discursive constructions of games

Among the studies that have researched the discursive construction of digital games, the mainstream media has been an important object of analysis. McKernan (2013) has studied coverage of video games in the *New York Times* from 1980 to 2010 and found that there are far more cases of games being depicted as socially threatening than socially beneficial through this time period; however, during the 2000s, the Art section of the *New York Times* presented games in much more positive ways. These findings

suggest that games may be depicted in positive ways in certain contexts, but overall there remain concerns about the social influence of games. McKernan's study is broadly consistent with that of Williams (2003), who undertook a content analysis of articles published in widely-circulated US news magazines from 1970-2000, with the aim of discovering how games were covered and what type of player identities were depicted in terms of gender and age. Williams found that the initial arcade games in the 70s were shown as being for all ages, but when home consoles were introduced in the early 80s there emerged a split between child play and adult play, with adult play constructed as 'shameful or deviant' (Williams 2003, p. 534). Interestingly, Williams found this age framing dissipated in the late 90s, and that by then adults 'were seemingly able to come out of the video-games closet' (p. 535). However, this dismissal of an age-based stigma may be overstated considering the methodology of a content analysis of news media, as Williams was searching for overt mentions of age in the articles. While overt mentions of age may have dissipated, it is a leap to suggest that negative perceptions of adult play also suddenly disappeared—and certainly studies of game players regarding their play practices (discussed below) indicate that negative perceptions of adult play still persist in some form. Negative perceptions of children's play also persist in media coverage according to a study by Whitton and McClure (2017). These authors, both education scholars interested in possibilities for game-based learning, conducted a small-scale critical discourse analysis of UK newspapers in 2013 and found that these newspapers presented digital games as part of a narrative that considers technology as 'bad' for child users. These authors further noted how newspaper articles draw links between games and violence, and how game players were depicted without agency over their play. This study emphasises quite negative constructions of games in these newspapers, which forms a contrast with McKernan (2013) and Williams (2003), who note some more positive media coverage from the more recent time periods in their studies (2000 onwards). This difference may be due to different data sources and research methods, indicating that further research in this area would be beneficial.

Schroeder (2011) has also analysed mainstream media news articles across a similar time period as Williams (2003)—the 1970s through to the 2000s—but Schroeder's study is based on German and Australian sources and looks at the reception of digital games in these countries. He argues that games are more culturally accepted as

'legitimate' in Australia than in Germany, and he examines the countries' respective national cultures to consider why the perception of digital games has been somewhat different. Schroeder suggests it is because in Germany games were subjected to a cultural rejection of 'the "low", "crude", "soulless", and accessible' (p. 303), which was not as strong a feature of Australian society. While seen as a 'legitimate' activity in Australia, playing games was not taken 'seriously', instead being just a bit of fun. Schroeder's study is useful for the way it places digital games in the context of national cultures, but limited in that it analyses media texts across several decades, so Schroeder can only look at a small range of media texts in any given time period to establish the cultural acceptance or rejection of digital games. As a result, he takes articles written by game journalists in mainstream newspapers to represent the cultural perception of games nation-wide. Another study that compares newspaper coverage across countries is Kim and Min's (2016) content analysis of US and South Korean newspapers. These authors found that the newspapers they studied focused mainly on industry-related issues, and, interestingly, found that the issue of 'game addiction' was rarely addressed. This is likely to be a result of the newspapers chosen for analysis; the US newspapers were the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, which tend to feature more governmental, economic, and financial topics.

Shaw (2010) also carried out a discourse analysis of some high-circulation US-based newspapers, but unlike the above studies which looked at positive or negative views of games, Shaw aimed to discover how 'video game culture' has been discursively constructed. She argues that video game culture is constructed as separate from mainstream culture, and this positioning 'allows for video games to be dismissed as both a form of entertainment or the culture of an "other"' (p. 415). This study provides useful data on the depiction of games in mainstream media sources, but Shaw stresses that it focuses specifically on games and game play being described as a 'culture' (all her search terms included this word) rather than how digital games are discussed more generally.

Beyond these mass media sources, the way game companies present their products in advertisements has been another significant area of study. Thierren and Lefebvre (2017) have proposed an analytical framework for studying print advertisements of games, and

argue that studying these texts is important as they contribute to discursive constructions of the specific games advertised as well as the history of the medium. Chess (2010) has analysed Nintendo advertisements in women's magazines and shows how these advertisements emphasise the 'productive', self-help aspects of the games for this female audience. Chambers (2012) also studied Nintendo game advertisements in her analysis of how the company marketed its Wii console, describing how Nintendo targeted its system at families as a communal activity, in contrast with the way Nintendo initially marketed its games as toys for children and teenagers in the late 80s and 90s (Sheff 1994). This is a notable shift in the way a major company has depicted its own games, although despite this focus on social play in advertisements, Chambers points to other research (Aarsand & Aronsson 2009) that suggests play practices are often privatised and solitary even when the game machine is located in a communal space like a living room.

Another highly important area of research regarding the discursive construction of games is the way games are depicted in enthusiast games media. Consalvo's (2007) study of the phenomenon of 'cheating' in digital games focuses on how game magazines and other paratexts contribute to understandings of games. Consalvo and Paul (2013) have also studied the enthusiast games media websites *Gamasutra* and *Kotaku* with the aim of identifying what counts as 'real' or 'authentic' games. These authors argue that the important factors in constructing a game as authentic include the developer's pedigree, a focus on the game's mechanics, the game's apparent depth and complexity, and the game's payment model ('free-to-play' systems being poorly regarded).

Kirkpatrick (2012, 2013, 2015b) has made an important contribution to the study of enthusiast games media by studying UK game magazines from the 1980s and 90s, with the aim of identifying the emergence of a particular culture of games. Kirkpatrick suggests that the appearance of the compound word 'gameplay' in game criticism in the mid-80s marked the establishment of a distinct 'gaming culture' and 'gamer' identity, which allowed games to be understood as distinct from the computing and technological associations they spawned from. An important observation in Kirkpatrick's work based on the study of these magazines is that attempts to establish the cultural legitimacy of

games and gaming are not fully successful. He suggests this is the case for several reasons: rather than breaking free of their association with technology, games are still described through 'technical allusion'; the ambiguity of 'addictiveness' in game discourse perpetuates a positioning of games as 'abnormal'; and efforts to establish games as 'grown up' struggle to overcome cultural understandings of play as childish (Kirkpatrick 2013, pp. 87-92). Kirkpatrick argues that these are 'constitutive ambivalences' of gaming, in that resolving these ambivalences would result in the construction of something other than games. Also based on the study of game magazines from this time period, Kirkpatrick (2017) further outlines how digital game play and game culture came to be coded as masculine as they were established as distinct from computing culture. Kirkpatrick uses Bourdieu's field theory extensively in his studies, and this thesis uses Kirkpatrick's term 'gaming's field' in its analysis; Bourdieu's theory is discussed later in this chapter.

Two other studies of the historical emergence of games and game culture are Newman's (2017) study of how games came to be established in homes in the United States during the 1970s and early 80s, and Kocurek's (2015) study of game arcades which also focuses on the 70s and 80s. Both these studies draw on diverse data sources and both document how digital games came to be associated with a young male audience. Together, these studies by Kirkpatrick, Newman, and Kocurek illuminate how characteristics and understandings of games, gamers, and game culture were established during these decades. Common themes in these studies include the significance of discourses of technology to how games were and are constructed; the way games and game culture became gendered around this time period; and how these early formations continue to affect game culture today.

The textual analyses reviewed above offer some valuable insights into the discourses that shape the construction of games and play, and the present study aims to make a significant contribution to this area of research. Many of the most extensive studies of the discursive construction of games and play have looked at previous decades, such as the 1970s and 1980s. Other studies have explored how discourses may have changed over decades. The present study looks at more recent sources of data, and therefore offers a deep exploration of game discourses from a more recent time period (December

2013 to June 2014). Another important aspect of the present study is that it analyses both mainstream and enthusiast publications from the same time period, providing opportunities to explore how these publications may feature similarities or differences in their constructions of the value of games and play. To further discuss the importance of studying discourses of games and play, the following section reviews additional research that has explored cultural understandings of player and 'gamer' identities.

Constructions of player and 'gamer' identities

Previous research suggests that people who play games are very aware of negative perceptions of game play and stereotypes of players, and these perceptions are an important consideration in understanding the value of play. Online surveys carried out by Kowert, Griffiths and Oldmeadow (2012) further suggest that negative stereotypes of gamers still circulate. These researchers surveyed self-identified 'gamers' and 'nongamers', mostly from the US and UK, to learn if participants felt the stereotype of online gamers as unpopular, unattractive, non-dominant (i.e. idle), and socially inept was accurate. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 'gamers' generally did not consider it accurate, while 'nongamers' did. Both groups strongly felt the stereotype to exist 'out there' in society. Harvey (2011) found that stereotypes can be held by players even when their own practices contradict them. Her interviews and ethnographic study of young Canadians aged 8-15 and their parents found that while practices ran counter to stereotypes and gender norms—for instance, women and girls were found to play and enjoy violent first-person shooters like *Halo* (Bungie 2001), a genre often constructed as the domain of boys and young men—these stereotypes and norms were still reinforced in interviews. Harvey's study and the others cited above suggest there are discrepancies between the practices and perceptions even of game players.

A number of studies have sought to learn about the perceptions of parents whose children play games. Eklund and Bergmark (2013) surveyed Swedish parents and found negative views of games, particularly pertaining to 'addiction'. The issue of addiction was also raised in Aarsand's (2011) interviews with US parents, along with other negative descriptions of games as 'a waste of time' and 'a waste of money' (p. 329),

though Aarsand also found some positive descriptions when discussing the use of games for education. Aarsand followed the study of parents with a study of teenagers (2012) and found in interviews that teenaged game players constructed themselves as 'ordinary' players who control their play, in opposition to 'hardcore' players who might play too much. This opposition further suggests that the 'hardcore gamer' identity can be understood as a negative one in contexts outside of specific enthusiast game cultures where this identity might be more valued.

A number of researchers have studied 'older' game players to learn how and why they play. Quandt, Grueninger and Wimmer (2009) interviewed game players in Germany between the ages of 35 and 73 to study how the 'gray haired gaming generation' felt about their play practices. The interviewees believed that social acceptance of games 'is still low' and that playing games is considered inappropriate 'for that age group' (p. 41). The study also found that conflicts could arise with partners if they felt the time spent playing could be used more 'productively' instead; this raises the issue of productivity, which is a significant issue in the valuing of digital play and is discussed in detail below. De Schutter (2011) also studied older players (45-85) in Flanders by means of a survey and found that the majority of participants engaged in solitary play rather than social play. De Schutter ponders whether the cultural status of games might be a possible reason for playing alone, though this possibility was not investigated in the survey itself. The practice of solitary play was also examined by Thornham (2009) in her interviews with game players in some UK households. The interviewees stressed the social aspects of play (that is, playing with friends), and considered solitary play to be 'abnormal' (p. 151). Thornham found that there are 'issues to do with play and the uneasy relationship between play and adulthood or adult pastimes' (p. 142). Pearce (2008) carried out surveys of, and interviews with, 'baby boomer gamers' aged 40 and above who participate in online game communities. The results were counter to the traditional 'gamer' stereotype, which is typically constructed as male, young and white; for example, a slight majority of the participants in Pearce's study were women. The research cited above on game players and their relationship to digital play and the gamer identity is significant because, while there is evidence to suggest that stereotypes of 'gamers' are inaccurate, they may still contribute to digital game play being considered

inappropriate (Quandt, Grueninger & Wimmer 2009), abnormal (Thornham 2009), or wasteful (Aarsand 2011).

An important subject of academic research in recent years has been the more problematic aspects of game culture and 'gamer' culture. Research by Shaw (2012, 2013, 2014), which has focused on marginalised players, has been influential in critiquing the meanings of the 'gamer' identity and game culture, and this has been particularly important in the wake of the gamergate event that began in 2014. Shaw (2012) conducted interviews with game players to examine the gamer identity, particularly how it relates to identities of gender, sexuality, and race. Shaw suggests that identifying as a gamer or not is influenced by how games are marketed to players, which raises important questions about the lack of diversity in constructions of the 'gamer' audience. In addition, interviewees 'felt gaming trivial and stigmatized' (p. 31), 'a guilty pleasure, a juvenile pastime', and that the medium is 'inherently unimportant' (p. 40). This prompts Shaw to argue that the construction of the medium itself is significant to players identifying as gamers or not. Shaw (2013) has further argued that instead of trying to fit marginalised audiences into the 'gamer' category, a better approach is to reject the privileging of the category; in other words, game audiences do not need to be 'gamers'. This stance has arguably been justified by the unfolding of gamergate, which showed that the meanings and practices of gamer culture are far too toxic—an argument Consalvo (2012) also made on the basis of earlier sexist controversies prior to gamergate. These scholars have reinforced an earlier argument advanced by Fron et al. (2007) that power structures in the game industry create a status quo that marginalises players who do not fit into the constructed gamer audience. Other important research in this area has looked at how these marginalised players manage and push back against the discursive positioning of them as subordinate to the centred male gamer (Cote 2017; Fisher & Jenson 2017).

With the increased attention drawn to the toxicity of gamer culture, research in recent years has continued this interrogation of the meanings associated with game player identities. Cote (2018) examined issues of the enthusiast magazine *Nintendo Power* published in the mid-to-late 1990s and found that this magazine generally addressed a male audience and represented gamers as male, even at this time when the (ultimately

unsuccessful) ‘girl games movement’ was underway. If magazines address a male audience, it is perhaps not surprising that Fisher’s (2015) study of enthusiast game magazines from 2008 found that female game characters were represented in these magazines in a sexualised way. Adding to this problem is the way game companies themselves represent ‘gamers’. Chess, Evans and Baines (2017) studied American game commercials that aired in 2013, finding that whiteness and maleness were central to the ‘gamer’ identity; while some of these commercials did show more diversity in player identities, female players seemed to need ‘permission’ to play, such as by having a man also present in the commercial. This kind of conditional player identity is explored further by Chess (2017), who identifies the ‘designed identity’ of what she calls ‘Player Two’, a constructed female player at whom certain kinds of games are aimed, particularly ‘casual’ games with ‘feminine’ themes of ‘personal beauty, the care of self and others, domesticity, bodily management, and shopping’ (p. 15). Chess describes this constructed player identity as a ‘white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, middle-class mother’ (p. 30). These characteristics bring attention to elements of player identities beyond gender, including race, sexuality, age, and class. These are factors that are now receiving more attention in game studies, and the growing research on issues such as race (Gray 2014; Gray & Leonard 2018) and queerness (Ruberg 2019; Shaw & Ruberg 2017) are highlighting the unequal ways in which people are able to engage with games, and how these inequalities can be resisted. The research outlined here regarding player and gamer identities is significant for this thesis, which in part explores how players are represented and addressed in media publications.

Digital games and (un)productive play

A pertinent issue regarding the cultural value of digital games and play is the notion that it is wasteful. Academic and writer Michael Clune (2015, p. 155) writes that:

> When it comes to probing questions about their intimate life as computer-game players, most people don’t have much to say … Society has convinced them that computer games are a trivial pastime and there’s no reason to think about them.

The supposed wastefulness, triviality, or unproductiveness of digital play is significant, and is discussed here because it has important implications for how games and play are positioned and valued. An important factor in this is wider cultural understandings of play. Indeed, one of the issues that has attracted the attention of a number of game studies scholars is the legacy of play theorists Huizinga (1955) and Caillois (2001[1961]), and their notion that play is 'unproductive'. While their work has been well-known in play and leisure studies since its publication, it has been given extra attention in game studies primarily by Salen and Zimmerman (2004), who, in their seminal game design textbook *Rules of Play*, discuss the two theorists' work extensively. Salen and Zimmerman explain Huizinga's and Caillois's definitions of play as unproductive, and appropriate a term from Huizinga that has since been the subject of debate among game scholars: the magic circle. The term is taken from this passage in *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga 1955, p. 10):

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot' cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.

Huizinga's point is that different 'rules' apply in different domains of practice. The magic circle is used by Salen and Zimmerman (2004) as a metaphor for 'something genuinely magical that happens' (p. 95) when players cross a boundary (psychological and perhaps also physical, like the edges of a boxing ring) and begin to play a game. It marks off a location in time and space within which 'special meanings accrue and cluster around objects and behaviors' (p. 96). This concept of the magic circle serves to separate the game from the 'real world' (p. 94) and this conceptual boundary between game and reality reinforces Huizingian notions of play being separate, apart from, not serious, and not productive. It also echoes other theorisations of 'stepping outside' of everyday life, such as Turner's (1974) concept of the liminoid, and Bakhtin's (1984) concept of the carnivalesque.

However, several game studies scholars have questioned the magic circle and the idea that play is unproductive. Taylor (2018, p. 12) argues that the magic circle as discussed in game studies 'has caused more conceptual harm than good' by locating play outside of other areas of life, and has contributed to digital games being considered separate from other media. Taylor's research into Twitch streaming (2018) and esports (2012) notably explores the interconnections between, and assemblages (Taylor 2009) of, media platforms, practices, and communities. Consalvo (2009) and Liebe (2008) both state that 'there is no magic circle'. Consalvo takes issue with the 'formalist' approach of Salen and Zimmerman (2004), which examines the formal structure of games, and prefers instead to focus on the experience of players. However, Consalvo places some limits on the magic circle concept that do not exist in Salen and Zimmerman's definition. The magic circle, being in large part a psychological boundary, is very much a part of player experience; it might therefore be better understood as the 'lusory attitude', a term introduced by Bernard Suits (1978) and employed by Salen and Zimmerman (2004) to expand on the psychological dimension of the magic circle concept. Essentially, the lusory attitude is the willingness of players to play by the rules, to run around the track instead of cutting across it, to keep dribbling the ball instead of hiding it in their shirt and running straight to the hoop—to be inefficient in order to follow the rules. Even cheating is its own form of play with its own special meanings, as Consalvo (2007) has elsewhere discussed. Rather than being a purely formalist concept, the magic circle is primarily about the player's approach to a game. Liebe (2008) believes that digital games are simply different from traditional games in that the computer upholds the rules in a digital game rather than the players doing so themselves. But again, if the magic circle is understood as a psychological boundary—a lusory attitude—then the willingness of a player to submit to the computer's rules could still be considered an act of entering a magic circle, making the metaphor still applicable.

Ferreira and Falcão (2009) also focus on the player's attitude when they suggest the magic circle metaphor can be applied at a cognitive level, suggesting it 'manages the relation between play and game, in a gradual scale between less immersed and more immersed in the game' (p. 7). However, the term 'immersion' used by Ferreira and Falcão (2009) is highly contested in game studies, despite its common application in

more everyday discussions of games where it is commonly used to describe the player experience as plunging into a virtual world and by implication leaving the 'real' one. Calleja (2014) has argued strongly against the suitability of the term because of the implied split between game and reality. For Calleja, the terms 'immersion' and 'presence' suggest 'a unidirectional dive of human subjectivity into a containing vessel, a split between the physical "here" and the virtual "there"' (p. 222). He instead prefers the term 'incorporation', which 'posits the virtual as a productive aspect of contemporary reality' (p. 223), not something separate from reality. Not surprisingly, Calleja (2010) has also argued against the concept of the magic circle for the same reason, claiming that Salen and Zimmerman (2004) have misappropriated Huizinga's term and that it should not signify a separation from reality. But Huizinga (1955, p. 13) certainly stresses play's existence outside of 'ordinary life' in his definition, as does Caillois (2001, p. 9) when he describes play as being 'accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life'. Whatever the meaning attached to the magic circle, it is this longstanding conceptualisation of games as unreal, virtual, and separate that has drawn criticism from scholars like Calleja who question the dichotomy. Calleja (2010, p. 343) fears that the magic circle's conceptual placement of play and games outside of the 'real world' is 'an act of escapism' that will attach connotations of triviality to games.

This aversion to escapism seems to be an important point in the legitimacy of play; Deterding (2018) discusses how adults often provide 'alibis' for their play, such as suggesting it aids their health or other 'adult' responsibilities, in order to avoid embarrassment. Similarly, Thornham (2009, p. 142) has noticed a need for game players to justify play as 'something other than pleasure, escapism or entertainment'. This appears to be the case among some game scholarship too; if games are considered unproductive, they could easily be considered trivial and wasteful—a worrying thought for those who would make a career of their study. Arguing against the notion that play is unproductive, Pearce (2006, p. 18) has argued instead for 'play as an act of production'. Her case study for this claim involves a group of players of the massively multiplayer game *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* (Cyan Worlds 2003), who, when the game shut down, started to recreate aspects of the game in other virtual worlds. Pearce claims these activities show that play can be productive. But while certainly productive, these

activities did not take place in the act of play itself, but elsewhere. Along the same lines as Pearce (2006), Postigo (2003) and Kücklich (2005) have both argued that the creative work of 'modders', who modify games to add new content or change rules, represents a blurring of work and play, and Ellis (2015) likewise sees modding as a productive engagement with games. Kücklich (2005) coins the term 'playbour' to describe a hybridisation of play and labour that occurs in the activity of modding. Both Kücklich and Postigo have a more negative view than Pearce (2006) on this issue, arguing that the games industry exploits this unpaid work for its own commercial gain. Other 'productive' activities performed with games include those outlined by Dibbell (2006) and Castronova (2005), who explain how people have made a living from 'playing' the economy in massively multiplayer games like *EverQuest* (Sony Online Entertainment 1999) and in virtual worlds like *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003). These activities also challenge the work/play binary, in that they might be construed as work rather than play, or as a combination. Dibbell (2006, p. 3) writes of 'the radical confusion of production and pretend', and Yee (2006, p. 68) has even suggested that the 'work' performed by players in these games may result in work and play becoming 'indistinguishable from each other'—a claim that may be overstated, but which does point to the labour involved in the act of digital play, particularly in massively multiplayer games which often involve periods of 'grind' to achieve rewards. All these authors raise important issues about whether these productive activities could be considered a form of play themselves, or a blurring of work/play boundaries in that the players might perform 'work' to achieve their play goals, and this may be a compelling argument for productive 'playful' activities. However, these perspectives on modding or earning money through play are unsatisfactory to the broader question of the productivity of play given that these activities are performed by only a minority of players; digital play as a pleasurable leisure activity could still be considered unproductive by these measures.

Wirman (2009), on the other hand, does address the question of digital play itself being productive by suggesting that the game itself is produced in the act of play, a point also explored by Humphreys (2005). As implied by a conceptualisation of games as cybernetic with feedback exchanged between operator and machine, as discussed earlier, the player is essentially a co-author along with the designer. Wirman follows

Aarseth (1997) in considering the actions of game players as 'configurative', in contrast to the 'interpretative' actions of readers/viewers of linear media like film. The ability—or even requirement—of players to alter or construct the progress and outcome of a game means that productivity is 'a precondition for the game as a cultural text' (Wirman 2009). As well as the act of play producing the game itself, Wirman suggests four other categories of productivity related to digital games: the production of texts which help other players, like walkthroughs and strategy guides; the production of new or altered content for a game, including mods such as those discussed by a number of other scholars; the use of games as tools for producing other texts, like machinima films; and games in which players produce new content through gameplay itself, such as *Spore* (Maxis 2008) and *Little Big Planet* (Media Molecule 2008), in which players' in-game creations are shared with others (Wirman 2009).

Some research has shown that the notion of 'productive' play is particularly important for certain kinds of players. For example, Chess (2010) has studied Nintendo advertising campaigns in women's magazines and shows how these advertisements emphasise 'productivity through self-help' (p. 251) for these players. Age is also an important factor regarding productive play; both Iversen (2016) and De Schutter (2017) show how much of the scholarly research on games intended for older adults focuses narrowly on 'benefits' and 'accessibility'. Iversen (2016) argues that the apparent importance of economic productivity drives this focus on 'functionalistic' uses of games, as ageing adults are often considered a looming economic threat. Moving beyond this way of conceptualising the play of older adults, De Schutter (2017) instead proposes a player-centred 'gerontoludic design framework' that privileges 'meaningful play' on the basis that digital play has inherent value.

As well as these conceptual debates about what is considered to be productive play, there have long been efforts to develop digital games for 'productive' purposes. The development and use of 'serious games' became a significant field of research in the early 2000s in regard to digital games specifically, although the concept stretches back decades (Deterding et al. 2011). The term refers to games that have been developed for some 'serious' purpose besides entertainment (Ritterfeld, Cody & Vorderer 2009, p. 6). The term, of course, implies that games for entertainment are not 'serious', and so risks

reinforcing conceptions of these digital games as trivial leisure. While serious games remains an active area of research (Dörner et al. 2016), in more recent years the concept and practice of 'gamification' has been a highly notable case of games being used for 'productive' purposes. As noted earlier, Walz and Deterding's (2014) notion of the 'gameful world' is a broadening of this concept, and most of the contributions to their edited volume discuss the practice. Gamification is a multidisciplinary field of research (Nacke & Deterding 2017) often defined as 'using game design elements in non-game contexts' (Deterding 2014, p. 305). The 'elements' part of this definition is what separates gamification from serious games, as rather than involving fully-developed games, gamification may involve the use of game-like elements such as point systems and leaderboards. Gamification has been the subject of a great deal of discussion and debate, both in game studies and in various other fields. Indeed, much of the research on gamification has appeared in fields such as education and health rather than game studies (Deterding 2017; Seaborn & Fels 2015). Perspectives from game scholars and others are often critical of the concept and/or the practice of gamification on the basis that it is exploitative (Bogost 2014) or used as a form of control over users (deWinter, Kocurek & Nichols 2014; Schrape 2014). Fuchs et al.'s (2014) edited volume considers ways of 'rethinking gamification', which they deem necessary because of how enthusiastically the concept has been adopted in certain contexts, including marketing discourse and practices of self-governance and self-surveillance such as the 'quantified self'[3]. Addressing these critiques, Fuchs (2018) argues that gamification can still be used 'subversively' by artists and activists. Similarly, Woodcock and Johnson (2018) call for gamification-from-below as a resistance to top-down approaches that attempt to put play in the service of work. Here they build on Dragona's (2014) concept of counter-gamification, which opposes the use of 'game design elements in non-game contexts' and instead calls for 'disruptive play' (p. 239) to challenge systems of oppression. These debates regarding gamification often involve the question of whether play has revolutionary potential for social movements (Shepard 2011) or is merely folded into systems of power. These authors who are critical of gamification practices tend to describe games as restrictive and controlling, and play as more creative and

[3] This term refers to practices of monitoring and tracking information about ourselves, generally with the goal of behavioural change. Activity trackers such as Fitbits are a popular example.

freeform, noting Caillois's (2001) distinction between *ludus* (structured and disciplined play) and *paidia* (less controlled, improvisational play).

These disagreements over the un/productivity of play are noteworthy because they show a struggle for the legitimacy of digital games in the field of game studies. As Narine and Grimes (2009) have noted, the sense of 'productive' used by Huizinga and Caillois, and most of the game studies scholars cited above, stems from industrial capitalist notions of productivity: the manufacture of goods and the movement of capital. It is possible to argue for the productivity of games on these grounds by pointing to the 'work' performed by players to produce new mods, or the educational benefits of serious games, or the health applications of gamified systems. However, beyond this rather narrow ideological basis, a more encompassing argument for the productivity of play comes from focusing on the player as a social subject and games as cultural production, as Lindtner and Dourish (2011) have. In their study of Chinese game players, these authors consider game play itself to be productive in the sense of 'the formation of cultural capital, of aspiration, of selfhood and nationhood at the intersection of particular practices and transnational developments' (Lindtner & Dourish 2011, p. 455). This is a far more promising approach; while others have tried to rebut the unproductivity of play on industrial capitalist grounds, Lindtner and Dourish shift the issue by taking an approach rooted in cultural studies. In short, playing games is obviously meaningful to people, and therefore the games, and the act of play, are significant.

Bourdieu's field theory

In this study's analysis of discourses of games and play in media publications, Pierre Bourdieu's field theory (e.g. Bourdieu 1993) is used to conceptualise and analyse the ways in which games and players are positioned in 'gaming's field' (Kirkpatrick 2012, 2013). This theory is outlined here, along with a discussion of its application to the present study. Bourdieu stated that he did not aim to 'do' theory, in the sense of constructing purely theoretical ideas divorced from practical application or research. Over the course of his career, he instead developed and refined a number of concepts,

including field, capital, and habitus, to explain the social phenomena he investigated, ultimately building a body of work that outlines processes of social reproduction. He referred to these concepts as 'a set of thinking tools visible through the results they yield' (quoted in Wacquant 1989, p. 50). For a number of reasons—including the fact that these concepts were developed and refined over decades, Bourdieu's reluctance to give clear definitions, and his complex and challenging prose style (at least in translation)—his theoretical tools can be difficult to pin down. However, Bourdieu's empirically-derived field theory has been fruitfully applied by himself and by other researchers to a diverse range of objects of study, in particular the arts (Bourdieu 1993, 1996; Grenfell & Hardy 2007), education (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990 [1977]; Maton 2014), and cultural practices more broadly (Bennett et al. 2009; Bourdieu 2010 [1984]). The following discussion outlines Bourdieu's three major theoretical tools—field, capital, and habitus—as well as some important critiques that highlight some limitations and extensions of these concepts. This is then followed by a discussion of how Bourdieu's theory will be used in the present study to consider the value and legitimation of digital games and play.

Field, capital, and habitus

Bourdieu's theory can be used to analyse how social agents (individuals, groups, or institutions) and practices are positioned and valued within particular social spaces, or fields. Put most simply, sites of social activity (fields) are shaped by struggles over resources (forms of capital). What exactly constitutes a field is perhaps best demonstrated by example: during his career Bourdieu scrutinised a variety of social fields, including the economic field, scientific field, and artistic field. These fields can be identified through observation and analysis of agents, practices, and objects. The artistic field, for example, is comprised of agents who produce, consume, and critique artistic works. Bourdieu noted that the only 'criterion of membership of a field' is 'the objective fact of producing effects within it' (1993, p. 42). However, while this criterion is *prima facie* simple, actually participating in a field requires certain resources—money, knowledge, social connections, and so on—which afford power to participants. The possession or lack of these resources thus determine the boundaries of a field. These resources that are so important to the shaping of fields are forms of capital.

Bourdieu identified three fundamental forms of capital: economic, social, and cultural (Bourdieu 2006). All these types of capital are symbolic insofar as they are recognised as valuable, though they can take material forms as property, clothing, books, and so on. Social capital refers to valuable connections between people, and for most people takes time to accrue, as does cultural capital, which involves knowledge of cultural products and practices. Bourdieu (2006, p. 106) further breaks down cultural capital into three different forms: it can be embodied in individuals as attitudes and competencies; it can be objectified as cultural products; and it can be institutionalised, as with awards and qualifications. Bourdieu (2006, p. 113) maintained that 'economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital' and that these other types are 'transformed, disguised forms of economic capital, never entirely reducible to that definition'. For example, while prestige in the field of art may stem from knowledge and possession of 'consecrated' artworks, some degree of economic capital is needed to acquire these markers of status in the first place. Once acquired, these artworks may lend the holder cultural capital, but they also hold monetary value and so can be converted into economic capital. Hence, a key consideration for Bourdieu is how convertible different forms of capital are. Social and cultural capital can be converted into economic capital in the right circumstances, such as when an educational qualification or a social connection—perhaps both—opens up a pathway into a well-paid job. Income from this job can be then be used to acquire other forms of capital. For example, economic and cultural capital may allow people to attend cultural events, at which social capital is strengthened by cementing social ties.

These concepts of field and capital are mutually constitutive. In his analysis of the literary field, Bourdieu (1993, p. 30) wrote that:

> the structure of the field, i.e. the space of positions, is nothing other than the structure of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which govern success in the field and the winning of the external or specific profits (such as literary prestige) which are at stake in the field.

The structure of a field is therefore ultimately determined by the distribution of forms of capital within it, and these forms of capital are produced and valued by interactions within the field. Some agents enjoy high status and prestige within a field, while others do not, and these agents continually seek to improve their positions. Importantly, each field has its own logic according to which agents, objects, and practices are positioned and valued. Working within these value structures and power relations, agents act to improve their positions in a field by acquiring forms of capital which are seen to hold value according to the logic of the field in question. In the economic field, for instance, a core organising principle is the accumulation of economically valuable resources, and so wealthy agents will enjoy high status. In the artistic field, on the other hand, economic capital operates very differently. Here, the highest status may be assigned to artists or consumers of art who disavow economic success as a marker of prestige (Bourdieu 1993). However, Bourdieu also noted that agents who disavow economic interest are working to accumulate 'symbolic capital', which can eventually be reconverted into economic capital (Bourdieu 1993, p. 75). It is not the case, then, that economic capital is not important in the artistic field; the point is only that it is valued in different ways by different agents. This contextual valuing of capital is why it is important to identify and analyse different social fields and their respective logics. A valuable resource in one field may hold little value in another, and so different fields must be analysed to determine the principles at work within them.

The concepts of field and capital can be used to discuss and analyse social spaces and the positions of agents within them. These concepts account for the array of possible actions and stances available to people—the 'space of possibles' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 30). But these possibilities are not viewed equally. The third of Bourdieu's major tools, habitus, accounts for the fact that people make choices from an array of possibilities available to them. Habitus refers to systems of dispositions inculcated over time (Bourdieu 1990). Bourdieu (1990, p. 53) wrote that habitus are 'structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures', meaning these dispositions form a logic of people's actions. They 'generate and organize practices and representations' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53). People tend to take actions that make sense to them, and habitus accounts for how they arrive at those decisions. Thus, people are inclined to take certain actions, to choose certain products, and to engage in certain activities as a result of their

backgrounds. Socio-economic and educational backgrounds may be particularly influential, both in terms of developing 'tastes' and in bestowing forms of capital. But one's habitus is not something that has only been formed in the past; it is an 'open system' that is constantly changed or reinforced as a result of experiences (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 133).

Field, habitus, and capital should not be considered in isolation from one another (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 96). While habitus may seem deterministic—that someone's social origins determine their life trajectory—this is only so if no attention is paid to the material conditions that people face; that is, the forms of capital they possess and their resultant position within social fields. People have various options available to them as a result of a combination of their dispositions and the social positions they occupy. Put briefly, for Bourdieu the habitus interacts with the distribution of capital in fields to produce effects (Bourdieu 1993, pp. 70-1).

Structural homologies and the field of power

While fields have their own shapes, there are similarities, or homologies, between them. Where positions across fields overlap, power structures become evident in the form of status afforded to individuals, accepted practices, and so on. For instance, in any given field economic capital is likely to afford its holders a significant amount of power and prestige, and so these agents will occupy similar positions in different fields. Given this, Bourdieu designates the dominant power structures in a society the 'field of power'. It is comprised primarily of political and economic power (Bourdieu 1993, p. 39), and these power structures are major factors in what is considered valuable and important. The field of power does not simply determine the structure of other fields; rather the field of power is constructed through the shifting relations between fields. In this way, each field contributes to a greater or lesser degree to the construction of the field of power.

Analysing struggles within a field

A central point in Bourdieu's theory is that people acting within a field engage in struggles to transform or preserve it, using whatever power they possess in relationships that are always unequal (Bourdieu 1998, p. 40). Changes to the structure of a field do not occur on their own or by accident. The strategies that agents employ in this regard—their stances or 'position-takings' (Bourdieu 1993)—are particularly worthy of analysis for what they reveal about the field's structure. Bourdieu considered a field's boundaries to be defined by these struggles, and claimed that an analyst's task is 'to describe a state (long-lasting or temporary) of these struggles and therefore of the frontier delimiting the territory held by the competing agents' (1993, pp. 42-3).

As an example, in his description of the field of cultural production, Bourdieu outlines how the field involves a struggle for autonomy from the field of power, wherein economic power rules. A fully autonomous field of cultural production would not be beholden to economic laws; instead the guiding principle would be 'degree specific consecration (literary or artistic prestige)', as opposed to economic success measured in book sales and so forth, which is the logic of the field of power (Bourdieu 1993, p. 38). However, while full autonomy may be desirable, it is never fully achievable. Bourdieu sees any particular field as operating within a society's broader power structures—the field of power—and so 'whatever [a field's] degree of independence, it continues to be affected by the laws of the field which encompasses it, those of economic and political profit' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 39). As part of this struggle, the process of cultural production involves establishing the value of the work:

> Cultural production distinguishes itself from the production of the most common objects in that it must produce not only the object in its materiality, but also the value of this object, that is, the recognition of artistic legitimacy (Bourdieu 1993, p. 164).

The field of cultural production is therefore the site of a struggle for autonomy in which participants stake their claims of artistic value, but where economic and political power is always influential. The idea that there are struggles within fields was particularly important to Bourdieu, because analysing these dynamics gives a field historicity

(Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 102). A field is not in a solid, unchanged state. There are always attempts to dominate, and always attempts to resist this domination. The structure of a field can be observed by analysing the struggles within it.

Critiques and limitations

While the concepts of field, capital, and habitus have been widely applied by researchers, they have also been critiqued and revised in a number of ways. In particular, critiques have focused on Bourdieu's overly-narrow conclusions about the origins and applicability of habitus and cultural capital. Bourdieu's application of habitus suggests that it is ultimately tied to class positions and functions uniformly across social fields, as this passage from *Distinction* (Bourdieu 2010, p. 171) indicates:

> Bearing in mind all that precedes, in particular the fact that the generative schemes of the habitus are applied, by simple transfer, to the most dissimilar areas of practice, one can immediately understand that the practices or goods associated with the different classes in the different areas of practice are organized in accordance with the structures of opposition which are homologous to one another because they are all homologous to the structure of objective oppositions between class conditions.

But while class is widely acknowledged to be a crucial factor in shaping dispositions, other influences may be just as important depending on the field in question. Factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, or religion may shape the way people view and engage with social practices, and these factors may interact with each other as well as with class positions (Bennett et al. 2009). Further, because social fields have their own particular characteristics, these socio-structural variables may be more or less influential in different fields, as well as in different locales and time periods. Digital game play provides a clear example here. A great deal of research and anecdotal testimony has detailed how women and girls are often made to feel unwelcome in some gaming communities and activities (Chess, Evans & Baines 2017; Cote 2017; deWinter & Kocurek 2017; Kirkpatrick 2017; Kuznekoff & Rose 2013; Salter & Blodgett 2012; Shaw 2012). As a result, gender is arguably very influential in the formation of dispositions towards gaming practices, in ways that could not be adequately explained by looking solely at class positions.

Bourdieu's explication of cultural capital has also been criticised as too restrictive in that it conflates some sources of cultural capital, such as education and family background, which should remain separate (Goldthorpe 2007). Bennett et al. (2009) argue that cultural capital should not be conceptualised as a single form of capital that has equal value and function in all circumstances. Instead they see cultural capital as formed from a range of 'cultural assets' which may bring esteem and privilege. The degree of advantage afforded by these assets may differ depending on the social field. A notable example is Thornton's (1995) study of club cultures, in which she develops the concept of subcultural capital to describe knowledges and artefacts that are recognised as desirable and valuable within dance club and rave cultures. Bennett et al. (2009), in their study of British cultural life, argue that cultural capital remains a useful concept, but should be further refined, and they identify additional forms of capital under the broad 'cultural' umbrella. These include technical capital, referring to marketable skills and abilities; affective or emotional capital, including the ability to sympathise with others; national cultural capital, meaning a feeling of belonging to a national entity and the privileges this entails; and subcultural capital, in line with Thornton (1995), referring to knowledges and practices that have value within small, specific groups, but little value elsewhere. These reworkings of the concept allow for a more precise understanding of the relational dynamics of cultural capital, including how it is produced, where it has value, and how readily it can be converted to other forms such as economic capital.

A further criticism concerns Bourdieu's tendency to distinguish between class-based 'elite' and 'popular' culture, as with his description of a bourgeois 'sense of distinction' and a working class 'choice of the necessary' (Bourdieu 2010). The notion of a singular hierarchy of cultural value, 'high' to 'low', correlated to class positions has been rejected by a number of scholars as too simplistic (Collins 2002; Frow 1995). Bennett et al. (2009) instead distinguish between high and low engagement in activities as a more accurate way of describing the organisation of cultural practices. Whereas some people are heavily engaged with cultural life in a wide range of activities, others are not. Their research also notes that some popular activities traditionally considered 'low' culture, such as watching television, are not particularly marked by class position.

These critiques highlight that a more nuanced approach to Bourdieu's tools is necessary; indeed, Bennett et al. (2009) note that towards the end of his career, Bourdieu himself focused more on field rather than habitus and cultural capital. However, an enduring advantage of Bourdieu's approach is its relational view of social organisation. People are positioned in relation to others, whether this is due to class position or other factors. Bourdieu's notion of field, characterised by the distribution of sources of capital, is useful in analysing the cultural positioning of objects, individuals, and institutions, and the 'struggles' that are always in progress to ascribe value to objects and practices.

Gaming's field and gaming capital

Using Bourdieu's concepts, it is possible to identify a field of games or gaming as a social space comprised of digital games, platforms, game developers, players, companies, critics, journalists, publications, and so on, as well as all the actions and interactions involving these agents, not least the act of playing a game. Kirkpatrick (2012, 2013), in his studies of UK game magazines from the 1980s and 90s, details the establishment of 'gaming's field'. He argues that as a specialised vocabulary for game evaluation—especially the neologism 'gameplay'— was established, a cultural space for gaming was carved out by magazines, players, developers, and other participants in this new field. Rather than merely being part of the field of 'computing', gaming became a distinct cultural field, with its own practices, values, and subject identity (the 'gamer'). Following Kirkpatrick, this thesis uses the term 'gaming's field' in its analysis of the value of digital games and play.

Among game scholars, the term 'gaming capital' (Consalvo 2007) has also gained some currency, referring to a subtype of cultural capital that involves knowledges held by people about games and game play. As with other types of cultural capital, gaming capital exists in various forms. Material forms include games themselves and the hardware that runs them. Embodied forms include the ability to manipulate game controllers and control schemes—a bewildering prospect to beginners—and often a

desire for mastery or completion of the game. People also have inclinations towards game platforms and genres, and discriminate between these—though, as noted above, these dispositions may be formed in diverse ways rather than by a unitary, class-based habitus. For instance, fast-paced 'twitch' action games aimed at players with youthful reflexes may be eschewed by elderly players. At times, dispositions may also bump up against conditions faced by players, as when female players are subjected to harassment and must develop coping strategies to deal with it (Cote 2017).

Players who choose to be 'immersed' in an elaborate 3D game for hours, or to pass a few minutes on a mobile game, have all variously taken actions available to them according to the logic of the field, their positions within it, and their tastes and desires. If someone knows what a 'multiplayer online battle arena' is, chooses to play such a game, knows what their goals are while playing, how to communicate effectively with other players, what strategies and tactics are effective, and how to manipulate the controls to enact these, the player is expressing a degree of gaming capital accrued over time. Beyond playing games, gaming capital may include how to make, sell, or appreciate games, knowledge of gaming history and culture, the ability to recognise cultural symbols such as Mario, and so on. These skills and knowledges may also hold different value within gaming's field depending on the particular practices and participants under consideration. For example, in 'speed-running' communities, reaching the end of a game's content as quickly as possible is the ultimate goal, and players develop an advanced set of skills and rules to compete with each other. In this case, following Thornton (1995), a kind of subcultural gaming capital becomes evident.

Gaming capital holds obvious value in gaming's field, while its value outside of that social space is less clear. Gaming knowledge and skill may not be so applicable in other circumstances or may even be viewed negatively. By analysing digital games and play with Bourdieu's field theory, it is possible to explore the positioning of games and game play in the wider culture, as well as how agents within the field may seek to maintain or change that positioning, as well as their own positions. In the present study, Bourdieu's theory is used to examine the cultural value ascribed to digital games and play, as this value is claimed by participants in discourse across media publications.

2 Methodology and methods

Digital games may be represented in many different ways. In media representations, it is common to see games constructed variously as entertainment, technology, economic product, art, media violence, sport, therapeutic tool, and so on. As a result of these constructions, the value ascribed to digital games and the act of playing them is similarly diverse. As the word 'constructions' suggests, this study proceeds from a constructionist ontology which sees social objects and categories as assemblages formed by social actors (Bryman 2012, p. 33). What games and play ultimately mean to us is a result of how we discuss and interpret these objects and activities, and so it is important to interrogate the moments when games and play are represented in discursive events. These moments of representation are the objects of analysis of this study. To explore the value of digital games and play, this study involved building two large data corpuses: mass media newspapers and enthusiast game websites. These two categories of sources were selected to assess how the value of games and play is constructed differently in these publications on the expectation that the interests of publications, writers, and their readers would differ across these social sites. These data corpuses were analysed using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodology to address the research questions.

With regard to the scope and focus of data collection and analysis, the data was drawn from Western, English-language content. While perceptions of games may differ in other parts of the world in interesting ways—such as in South Korea, where digital game play is a popular spectator sport (Jin 2010)—trying to incorporate these other cultural perspectives would make the study overly complex and difficult to manage, and language barriers make it impractical. Additionally, the choice of the specific enthusiast

websites (outlined below) means this thesis focuses primarily on digital games played on home consoles and computers, for several reasons. Firstly, these types of console and computer games have existed for decades, and cultural perceptions of digital game play have formed based on the types of games played on them and the practices of play with them. Secondly, they have also traditionally been the game types involved in controversies such as violent events and have therefore attracted mainstream media attention. Thirdly, these game types have also been the subject of most of the previous game studies scholarship. Finally, these game types are most commonly associated with the 'gamer' identity which is a term very widely-used in media discourse. While there are enthusiast websites that focus specifically on other kinds of digital games, such as mobile games, they were not chosen to include in this study for the above reasons. As it happened, however, mobile games still featured quite prominently in the enthusiast websites that were chosen, and analysis of mobile game coverage does form an important part of this thesis.

To explore and analyse discursive constructions of games and play, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodology is used. This study of textual data is ultimately an analysis of the relationship between language and digital games and play, and CDA as a research methodology is well suited to interrogating this relationship. Norman Fairclough (2010, p. 93) describes CDA as aiming to explore the relationships between '(a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes', as well as exploring how relations of power shape these practices, events and texts. This thesis has the same goal, in that it aims to explore 'semiotic realizations' (Fairclough 2009, p. 175) of digital games and play in the wider context of cultural values and ideologies. The next section outlines the CDA methodology in general as well as the specific framework chosen for this study. This is followed by an explanation of data collection sources and methods, and an explanation of how the data was analysed using a CDA framework. The analysis was aided by the use of the text analytics software Leximancer, which is explained below.

Critical discourse analysis

CDA is an 'eclectic' approach to research (Wodak & Meyer 2009, p. 3). Fairclough (2010) notes the importance of theorising CDA research in a transdisciplinary way by working with a theory of discourse along with other theories relevant to the topic. The present study draws on a variety of theoretical foundations, and at its core is a Foucauldian understanding of discourses as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972, p. 49). Proceeding from a Foucauldian theoretical base which holds that objects are talked into being through discourse, the study examines data from both mainstream and enthusiast media sources. In Foucault's (1981, p. 73) words, discourse analysis 'brings to light the action of imposed scarcity' of meaning. As the impositions on discourse—restrictions on what can be said in specific sites and contexts—differ across social sites, the study explores constructions of games and play within institutional and social constraints of discourse production. Moreover, collecting data from different media sources allows the analysis to contrast the constructions of games and play and explore similarities, differences, and tensions regarding the value placed on games and play. Blommaert (2005, p. 34) notes that specifying institutional sites of discourse production in CDA research avoids the trap of reducing and normalising discourse. Discursive events, such as the content of newspaper articles, are not considered normative but are instead placed in the context of their production and reception, and the analysis can explore the dialectical relations between events, institutions, and social structures—a chief aim of CDA research (Fairclough & Wodak 1997, p. 258). Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak (2011, pp. 357-8) have noted the elements of discourse of central importance to CDA practitioners as follows: discourses are dialectical; can sustain, reproduce, and also transform the social status quo; and 'can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations … through the ways in which they represent things and position people'. Discourses structure areas of knowledge through the processes and effects of power relations, and CDA concerns itself with probing the 'dialectical relations between discourse and power' (Fairclough 2010, p. 8). In practical terms, this involves analysing how social practices are represented semiotically by speaking subjects. Therefore, this study employs a CDA methodology to analyse the semiotic realisations of digital games and play in order to explore the value placed on these objects and practices.

The analysis is guided specifically by Van Leeuwen's (2008) 'social actors approach' CDA framework, which focuses on how the practices of social actors are realised semiotically in texts, though the analysis is also informed by other influential CDA practitioners like Fairclough (e.g. 2010). Van Leeuwen's framework is derived primarily from Foucault's concept of discourse, as well as Halliday's concept of register, 'a configuration of meanings' associated with particular situations (Halliday & Hasan 1985, p. 38). Halliday's linguistic theory—systemic functional linguistics—has been highly influential in CDA methodology, particularly Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach (Fairclough 2009). Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p. 139) argue that systemic functional linguistics is the linguistic theory that has the 'most in common with CDA and the most to offer' it. Halliday's theory posits that language is shaped by its social functions; 'functionality is intrinsic to language: that is to say, the entire architecture of language is arranged along functional lines' (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004, p. 31). This emphasis on function is important for CDA, because it allows analysts to explore not simply the form of language that appears in texts, but the social functions that it serves. Systemic functional linguistics proposes three 'metafunctions' of language: the ideational metafunction, or 'language as reflection', which construes human experience; the interpersonal metafunction, or 'language as action', which enacts relationships between language users; and the textual metafunction, or how language organises discourse into cohesive texts (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004, pp. 29-31). As Fairclough (1992) has noted, this functional theory of language is a good match for Foucault's theories of discourse as socially constitutive.

Van Leeuwen's approach is built on the understanding that discourse is 'recontextualized social practice' (2008, p. 3). The notion of recontextualisation, appropriated from Bernstein (1990), has found currency in other CDA approaches too, including Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999). Van Leeuwen's use of the concept acknowledges that when social practices are represented linguistically (or semiotically more generally), the reality represented is a socially constructed one, in which elements of a social practice may be altered. Van Leeuwen uses the term 'transformations' (2008, p. 17) to explain how elements of a social practice may be replaced, omitted, rearranged, or added. To give a simple example, a media release from the Australian

Council on Children and the Media (2013) recontextualises the social practice of digital game play as potentially dangerous to children, who need to be protected by judicious use of Australia's rating system. The statement omits elements of play that might seem important to players themselves—which Ensslin (2012) argues include discourses of 'cool', fun, and appreciation—or of elements of play which are considered to enhance mental and physical skills. The interests of the producers of discourse, who are themselves social actors, are an important factor in how a practice will be recontextualised, as elements may be omitted, added, or altered to suit their interests and perspectives. In practical terms regarding the present study, the choice to produce and publish specific media articles and to include or exclude specific details affects how digital games and play are discursively constructed in these publications, and this contributes to how games and play are understood more widely. Van Leeuwen's concepts of recontextualisation and transformation provide a theoretical framework for exploring the ways in which digital games, players, and the act of play are represented by various social actors, each with their own interests and motivations. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) suggest that this focus on social practices in CDA is beneficial because it allows the analysis to explore both overarching social structures and the specificities of social events: 'the notion of "practice" suggests both the relative permanence of the way things are normally done [structure], and the actuality of what is happening now [event]' (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999, p. 144). Van Leeuwen's approach, which examines the semiotic realisations of social actors and actions, is consistent with this focus. In the present study, the analysis involves conceptualising semiotic realisations of digital games and play in the text corpus as recontextualised social practice. It is also important to note that the instances of discourse being analysed—that is, the published media articles—are themselves social practices.

As well as this basis in discourse and linguistic theory, CDA engages closely with social theory to explain the dialectical relations between discourse and social structure, and the social theory employed depends on the topic at hand. As discussed in detail in the literature review, the present study uses Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) field theory in its analysis of how particular kinds of digital games are positioned and valued by participants in 'gaming's field' (Kirkpatrick 2013). Also relevant to understanding digital games and the act of play is new media theory, which conceives of new media

generally and games specifically as interactive, participatory, and playful (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, p. 3). Play theory, extensively summarised and advanced by Brian Sutton-Smith (2001) and Thomas Henricks (2006, 2015), also informs the analysis in this study, as it offers powerful ways of conceptualising the social role and status of play.

Leximancer

The text analytics software Leximancer (Leximancer 2019) was used in this study primarily to help identify and understand dominant discourses of digital games and play in the data sources. Given the large amount of textual data collected, coming to terms with the content of all the media articles is a daunting process. This is where Leximancer is useful as a tool to help the analyst understand the content of data corpuses. Once selected texts are uploaded to Leximancer, the software performs an automated content analysis, coding the data with 'concepts' it has found and outputting data about the frequency of concepts and relationships between them. The most immediate benefit of Leximancer is its ability to make analysing a large amount of text feasible, which helps to strengthen the CDA methodology itself. CDA has come under criticism at times (e.g. Widdowson 1998) for the analyst's ability to cherry-pick data to suit preconceptions. Mautner (2009a) argues that corpus linguistics helps to address this concern about the analyst's bias by introducing quantitative methods into a methodology that is primarily qualitative. Rather than running the risk of picking and choosing passages from the corpus, Leximancer's capabilities offer quantitative data that serves as a useful entry point for closer analysis. As Mautner (2009a, p. 138) explains, corpus linguistics 'helps researchers cope with large amounts of textual data, thus bolstering CDA's empirical foundations, reducing researchers' bias and enhancing the credibility of analyses'. While Leximancer can help to remove human bias from analysis, this is never completely possible. Wodak and Meyer (2009) point out that it is not possible to reach rigorous objectivity in discourse analysis, because it is not possible to avoid ideologies of analysts and ideologies embedded in the processes of collection and analysis. However, transparency at all stages of research means positions, interests and values of the analyst are open rather than hidden; this is what the 'critical' part of CDA implies (Wodak & Meyer 2009, p. 7). The Leximancer software is a useful tool

for maintaining that transparency, as well as aiding in the sorting and analysis of data. In addition, text analytics software like Leximancer can aid discovery because it can reveal patterns that might remain unnoticed if the analyst tried to manually sift through a large amount of text. Corpus linguistics of this sort is considered a 'quantitiative, linguistic extension' of CDA approaches (Wodak & Meyer 2009, p. 26) rather than a distinct approach in its own right, and the qualitative analysis of discourse remains crucial; as Mautner (2009a, p. 133) notes, any entirely machine-driven analysis of discourse 'would cease to be critical'. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p. 152) also suggest that computational techniques can be used to support qualitative analyses of texts. While Mautner (2009b) generally favours a very large amount of corpus data, she also demonstrates how corpus linguistics can work very effectively with smaller ad hoc corpuses, such as has been collected for this study. Lee (2008) also suggests that less data is needed to be representative when dealing with more specialised discourses.

The Leximancer software performs automated content analysis according to the software's algorithms and the user's preferred settings and displays the data visually. The content analysis is both conceptual and relational (Leximancer 2011). When data is loaded into Leximancer, the software identifies concept seed words from the data (or these seeds can be specified manually, although manual seeding was not used for this study as it would risk altering Leximancer's information output in unpredictable ways). The seed words serve as the basis for 'concepts', or collections of words that tend to occur together in the data. Through a series of iterations, Leximancer determines what these concepts 'mean' by building thesaurus entries for these concepts, based on how commonly words occur together, as well as how commonly they occur apart from each other. The software's determination of the concepts' meanings is based on work in corpus linguistics which holds that 'a word can be defined by its context in usage' (Smith & Humphreys 2006, p. 262). As well as this semantic determination of concepts, Leximancer determines how these concepts relate to each other by measuring co-occurrences of concepts. This relational stage of the analysis also involves the automated coding of text segments. Based on the user's settings, the software uses the concept definitions to determine whether that concept appears in a text segment, and if so that segment will be coded appropriately, allowing for later inspection. The default

length of these text segments is two sentences, and the segments end at paragraph boundaries, though these settings can be altered.

Once this concept coding process is complete, Leximancer outputs a 'concept map' which visually displays the results of the analysis (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2 below, and Appendices A and B for all concept maps). All concepts are displayed on the map, and their position relative to each other indicates the relationship between them. Concepts that tend to occur together in the data are clustered close to each other, and these clusters of concepts are surrounding by large coloured circles, which indicate 'themes'. Themes are a convenient way of showing which concepts are more closely related than others and offer a starting point for determining how the corpus content is distributed. The theme size can be easily altered, allowing for a granular analysis to determine which concepts are most closely related. As well as this visual display, the Leximancer data output is presented as ranked lists of concepts and themes, as well as the thesaurus data for each concept. This is explained further in the data analysis section below.

Leximancer was used in this study in the early stages of analysis to help work through the large amount of data. As an example of how this software was useful, the Leximancer concept map for *Daily Mail* newspaper (Figure 2.1 below) shows 'parents' as a concept, suggesting this newspaper offers, *inter alia*, a parental perspective on children's digital game play. The *New York Times* concept map (Figure 2.2 below), by contrast, shows 'company' and 'percent' as concepts, suggesting an economic and financial discourse. This gives an initial impression of the distribution of content in the specific data sources which can then be followed up with closer analysis. While Leximancer was useful in this way at the beginning of the study, the specific analysis presented in the following chapters relies mainly on close readings of specific articles; the use of Leximancer was simply one step in the process of analysis. Beyond the initial stages of approaching and understanding the data corpuses, Leximancer's major benefit was in searching for specific terms (such as 'immersion' or 'addiction') to see the frequency of these terms and the context they appeared in.

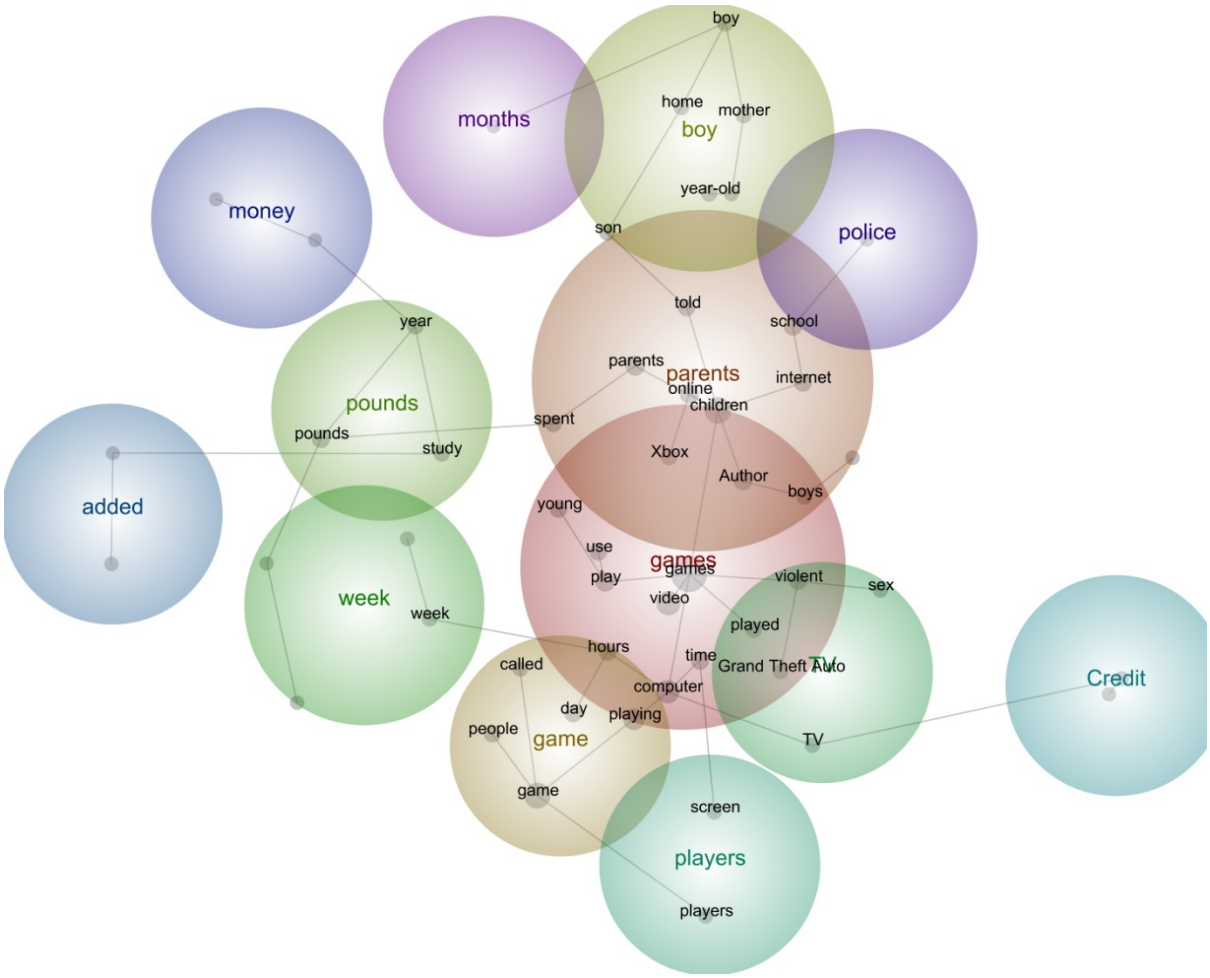


Figure 2.1 Leximancer concept map for the *Daily Mail* newspaper (UK)

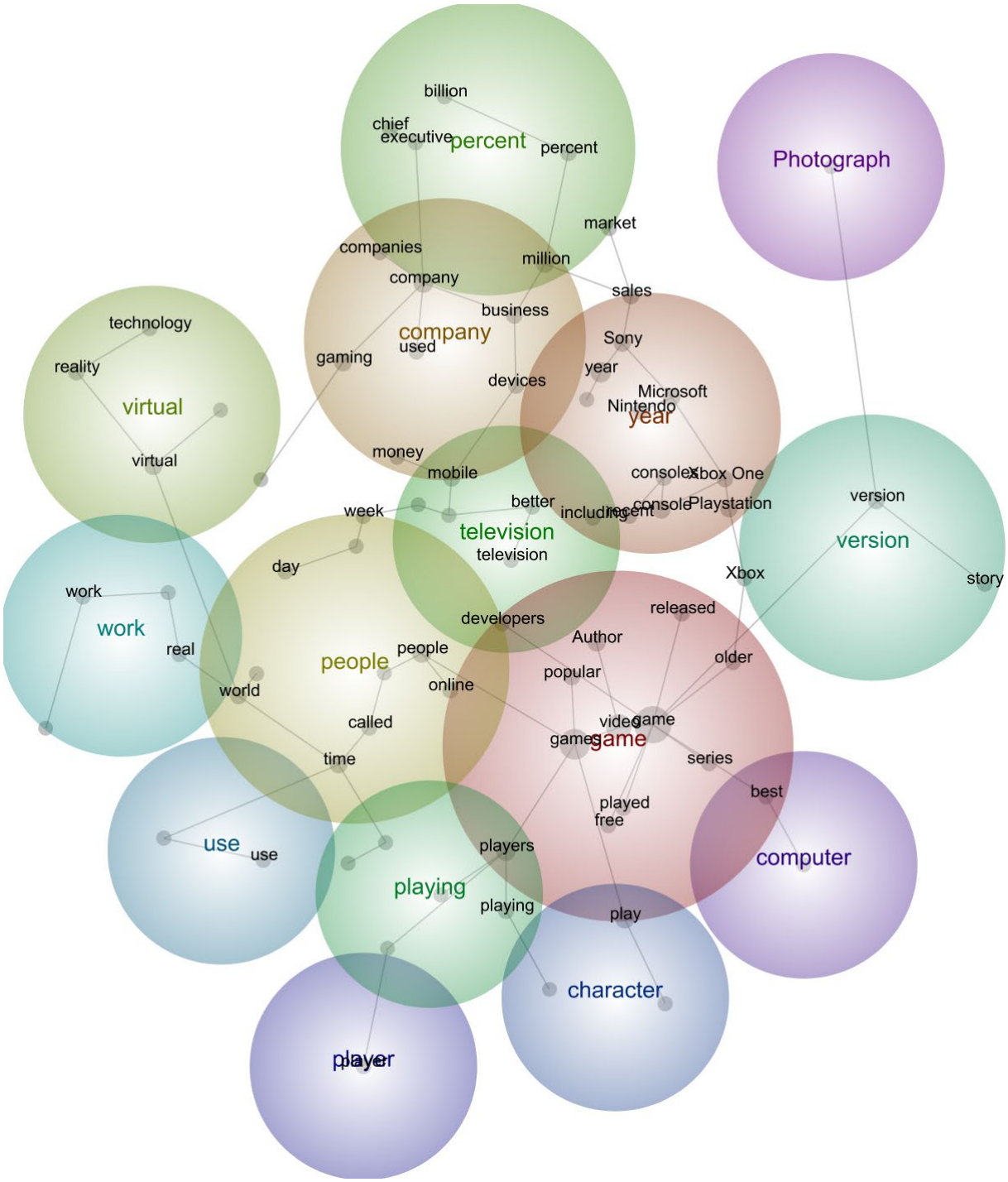


Figure 2.2 Leximancer concept map for the *New York Times* newspaper (US)

Corpus-building

The data analysed in this study was collected from the following sources, from the time period December 2013 to June 2014:

- Mass media newspapers
    - *New York Times* (New York Times Company; USA)
    - *Los Angeles Times* (Tribune Company; USA)
    - *Toronto Star* (Star Media Group; Canada)
    - *Vancouver Sun* (Postmedia Network; Canada)
    - *The Sun* (News Corp; UK)
    - *Daily Mail* (Daily Mail and General Trust; UK)
    - *Herald Sun* (News Corp; Australia)
    - *Sydney Morning Herald* (Fairfax Media; Australia)
- Enthusiast game websites
    - *Gamespot* (CBS Interactive; USA)
    - *Polygon* (Vox Media; USA)
    - *Eurogamer* (Gamer Network; UK)
    - *GamesIndustry.biz* (Gamer Network; UK)

These sources are influential contributors to digital game discourse. The corpus was built while bearing in mind the four important criteria for data collection outlined by Bryman (2012, p. 544, citing Scott 1990): authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning; that is, a piece of data should be genuine, error- and distortion-free, typical of its kind, and comprehensible.

The English-language newspapers from the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia were selected based on a balance of high circulation figures, ownership, and location. Circulation numbers were sourced from Alliance for Audited Media (2013), Newspapers Canada (2013), Audit Bureau of Circulations (2013), and Audit Bureaux of Australia (2013). These newspapers are all accessible through the ProQuest Newsstand and NewsBank databases. Articles were collected from the seven-month collection window, from December 2013 to June 2014. This time period was long enough to avoid having any particular news story overly influence the results, and also included two significant time periods: December, which includes the lead-up to Christmas when consumer products such as game software and hardware may feature more heavily; and June, during which the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) trade show is held, attracting mainstream as well as enthusiast media coverage.

Digital games have a notoriously wide range of signifiers, which presents a challenge for data collection from newspaper sources. While 'video game' is the most frequently used term, there are a number of common alternatives. To cast a wide net, the following search terms were used to find newspaper articles in the ProQuest Newsstand and NewsBank databases:

- video game, video games, video gaming, video gamer, video gamers
- videogame, videogames, videogaming, videogamer, videogamers
- digital game, digital games, digital gaming, digital gamer, digital gamers
- computer game, computer games, computer gaming, computer gamer, computer gamers
- console game, console games, console gaming, console gamer, console gamers
- online game, online games, online gaming, online gamer, online gamers
- mobile game, mobile games, mobile gaming, mobile gamer, mobile gamers
- casual game, casual games, casual gaming, casual gamer, casual gamers
- social game, social games, social gaming, social gamer, social gamers
- game console, game consoles, games console, games consoles, gaming console, gaming consoles

Some articles were removed from the results based on a few factors:

- Duplicate articles containing the same content, in most cases due to early and late editions of a paper.
- Articles from 'regional' (Scotland, Ireland, etc) editions of the UK newspapers; only articles from the unmarked English edition were retained.
- Irrelevance; e.g. 'online gaming' referring to gambling websites, or a reference to Lana Del Rey's song 'Video games'.
- TV and event schedules; e.g. a TV guide that mentions 'video game' in its plot description of the film *Wreck-it Ralph.*
- No substantive content; e.g. quiz-style articles, or 'top 10' lists.

This process resulted in the collection of 1292 articles from these newspapers, which were saved as Word documents. The following table shows the number of articles from each newspaper:

Table 2.1 Number of articles collected from each newspaper source

Newspaper	Number of results
The New York Times (including *Book Review* and *Magazine* supplements)	383
Los Angeles Times	188
Toronto Star	137
Vancouver Sun	85
The Sun	163
Daily Mail	153
Herald Sun	103
Sydney Morning Herald	80

The enthusiast game websites were selected based on a combination of popularity, original editorial content, multiplatform game coverage (i.e. consoles, computers, and mobile), geographic spread, and their distinct focus. At the time of data collection, *Gamespot* and *Polygon* were among the top ten most-visited 'video game news and reviews' websites according to web analytic company Alexa (2013). *Eurogamer* was the most-visited European game 'news and reviews' website, as well as being in the top ten worldwide (Alexa 2013). *GamesIndustry.biz* is a popular industry-focused news website in contrast to the player-focused nature of the other sites and was selected on the basis of this different focus. These websites publish many articles about digital games every day, so to keep the quantity of data manageable, only their 'feature' articles were collected and analysed. These 'features' include opinion and analysis articles, as well as interviews with game developers. These feature articles are suitable to analyse in this study because they are indicative of topics, issues, and aspects of games and play that are considered to be important by these enthusiast websites. While different websites have different conventions for labelling their feature-style articles, efforts were made to collect articles that were as similar in kind as possible from these websites (detailed in Table 2.2). From the same seven-month window of data collection as used for the newspaper data, December 2013 to June 2014, a total of 1110 articles were collected from the enthusiast game websites and saved as Word documents, including any images featured in the articles. Some articles also included embedded

videos, and while these could not be saved in the same files, their presence was noted in the files so they could be followed up later if required.

Table 2.2 Number of articles collected from each enthusiast website

Website	Number of features
Gamespot[4]	338
Polygon ('Features' and 'Opinion')	202
Eurogamer ('Articles', 'Interviews', and 'Opinion')	327
GamesIndustry.biz ('Articles', 'Interviews', and 'Opinion')	243

Data analysis

Given the large amount of textual data collected for this study, the process of data analysis involved firstly using the Leximancer software to begin to form an understanding of the content of the newspaper and enthusiast website data corpuses. This process is discussed in more detail below. The use of Leximancer was only a starting point, however, and closer analysis was performed through close readings of the data collected. The date and title of each individual newspaper and enthusiast website article was entered into a spreadsheet so that observations could be made regarding each one. For example, notes were included about specific individuals represented as game players in newspaper articles, such as their age and gender, as well as how their digital play is represented. This exhaustive process of reading the articles and making these observations was informed by Van Leeuwen's (2008) critical discourse analysis approach and was supported by the use of Leximancer.

[4] *Gamespot*'s 'feature' articles included some types of articles that were not included as 'features' in the other enthusiast websites, so some exclusions were made to keep the data as similar as possible. Specifically, the following kinds of articles were excluded from the corpus: reviews of 'early access' games; game walkthroughs; and 'giveaway' competitions.

Leximancer analysis process

This section outlines the analysis process using Leximancer. One issue faced with using this software to explore the newspaper corpus is that one lone mention of 'video game' or any other individual term would satisfy the search criteria, but the rest of the article's content may not be relevant to digital games. This presents a challenge when using Leximancer to help identify dominant discourses around games. Unlike the enthusiast game websites, in which all articles feature games and play as their central topic and are therefore entirely relevant, mass media newspapers may represent and discuss games in the context of a broader or entirely different topic. Selecting only the newspaper articles specifically about digital games would mean discarding much useful data, and more importantly would work against the goal of identifying discourses that coalesce around digital games. For example, a *Daily Mail* newspaper article (8 April 2014) reporting a claim that children struggle at school after taking their iPads to bed is not specifically about games, but does mention games as one activity children might be engaged in. This is useful and relevant data, suggesting a concern with children's use of digital technologies. On the other hand, simply including *all* articles that mention digital games runs the risk of diluting the data set. An article about an entirely different topic which mentions 'video game' in passing is of negligible value in identifying dominant discourses, yet it affects the Leximancer data. While it is possible to use Leximancer to examine a specific concept like 'game', this results in a focus on that particular concept, whereas the present study aims to look more broadly at discourses around games.

The compromise adopted for this study was to input into Leximancer articles that mention digital games in at least ten per cent of the articles' content. This ensures that digital games are a significant factor in the content of the article, while still including articles that are not specifically about games. This approach best suited the goal of identifying discourses around digital games and play. An exception to this ten per cent guideline was made if an article foregrounded digital games in some way. For example, an article in *The Sun* titled 'Call of jihad' (13 Jun 2014) referenced the game *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (Treyarch 2012) in its headline and used an image from the game to illustrate the story. While the game was overtly discussed in slightly less than ten per cent of the article's story, it was still included in the data due to the strong

foregrounding of the game. Once this 'ten per cent' selection criterion was applied, 498 articles from the larger corpus were saved in Word documents for use in Leximancer. While this is less than half of the larger corpus, it served the purpose of helping to identify dominant discourses surrounding games in these newspapers. The full corpus of newspaper articles was still analysed through close readings as discussed above.

Table 2.3 Number of newspaper articles input into Leximancer

Newspaper	**Number of results**
The New York Times (including *Book Review* and *Magazine* supplements)	138
Los Angeles Times	62
Toronto Star	35
Vancouver Sun	25
The Sun	98
Daily Mail	63
Herald Sun	48
Sydney Morning Herald	29

Using Leximancer to analyse written data is an exploratory process involving several steps. While the visual concept map is powerful and approachable, it is only a starting point. Because the concepts Leximancer identifies are defined by their relation to other words in close proximity, the analyst needs to explore the Leximancer thesaurus results to gain an understanding of what the program has determined these concepts to 'mean'. The thesaurus data (see example in Figure 2.3) displays words in the text that Leximancer has associated with the concept, along with a 'score' to display the strength of the relationship between each word and the concept. From the thesaurus, the analyst can then view excerpts from the data in which a concept and a word have appeared in close proximity, thereby gaining a better understanding of the context. This examination of thesaurus entries avoids the temptation to rely on algorithmic interpretation of the data and ensures the meaning of the concepts are not taken at face value.

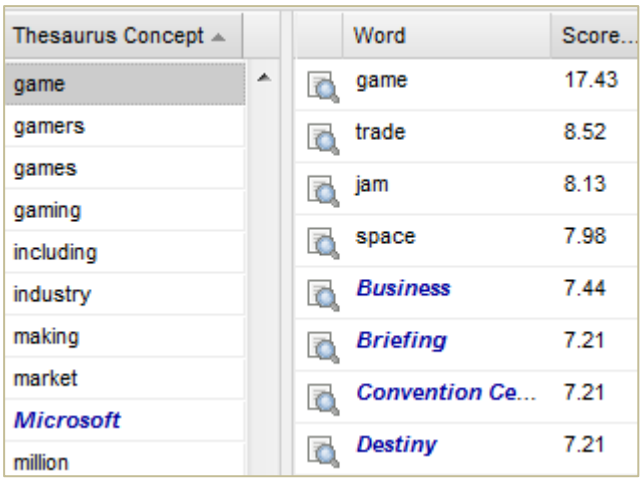


Figure 2.3 Leximancer thesaurus data for the concept 'game', showing this concept's relation to other words

As well as defining each concept, Leximancer determines relationships between concepts, allowing the analyst to explore which concepts tend to occur together in the data. This information is presented visually in the layout of the concept map—the closer the relationship between concepts, the closer they appear to each other on the map—and is also laid out in a ranked list of related concepts, and a ranked list of themes (groups of concepts, named after the most dominant concept in the group). The themes list (see example in Figure 2.4) shows the relative dominance of themes; the most dominant is given a figure of 100 per cent and the others are ranked against that. The list also shows which concepts comprise the theme.

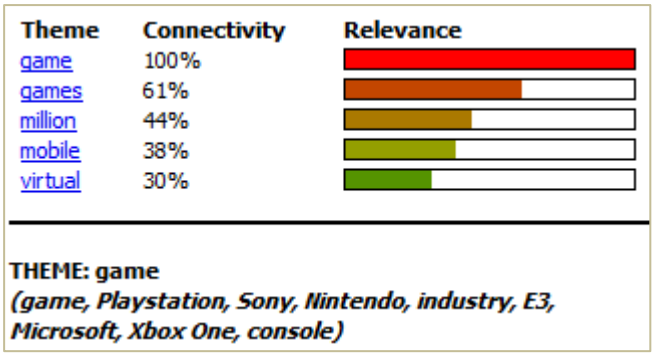


Figure 2.4 Leximancer themes list showing the most dominant theme of 'game' and the concepts (at bottom) that comprise it

The concepts themselves are also ranked based on their frequency in the text (see example in Figure 2.5). They are given a 'relevance' value based on their ranking

relative to each other, and a raw count number showing the number of times the concept appears in the corpus.

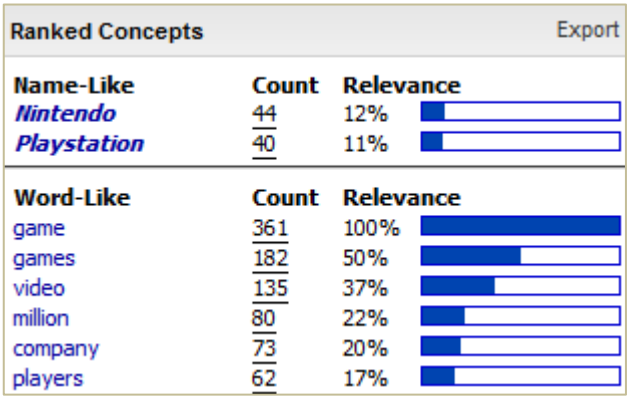


Figure 2.5 Ranked concepts in Leximancer

Selecting an individual concept displays another ranked list of concepts based on the 'likelihood' of these concepts appearing close together in the data. These rankings indicate the frequency at which the selected concept appears where the other concepts appear. The example below (Figure 2.6) shows 'game' as the selected concept; the ranked list indicates that when 'industry' appears in the corpus, 'game' appears with it 86 per cent of the time, clearly indicating that the industry in question is the game industry. When 'video' appears, 'game' appears with it 77 per cent of the time, and so on.

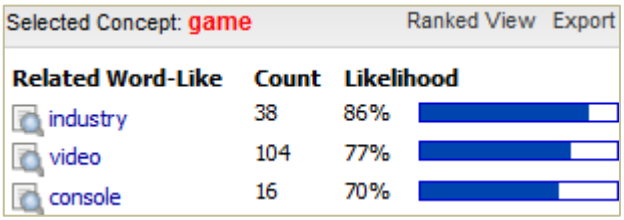


Figure 2.6 Leximancer display of concepts closely connected to the concept 'game'

Working through these relationships paints a clearer picture of the dominant subject matter in the data. The most important part of analysing data with Leximancer is to 'drill down' through these concepts and view the written data itself. When exploring relationships between concepts, or relationships in the thesaurus entries, the analyst can view text excerpts (or whole texts) in which these relationships appear. This is a vital stage in the analysis because it allows the analyst to confirm the exact nature of the relationships rather than inferring a connection from the concept names alone. This stage of the analysis also places the concepts in the context of the texts they appear in,

further extending the analyst's understanding of the data beyond Leximancer's algorithmic analysis. While the critical discourse analysis methodology employed in this study informs the entire process, it is at this point in particular that the use of CDA takes Leximancer's descriptive results and 'provides explanatory power' (Baker et al. 2008, p. 295). CDA is a methodology concerned not simply with which words are used in a text, but with *how* those words are used, and allows analysts to consider aspects an automated analysis cannot, such as contexts of text production, social actors and actions that may *not* be represented as well as those that are, and frameworks of social theory that can further aid analysis and understanding.

Performing these stages of analysis—progressing from Leximancer's initial conceptual and relational data through to examinations of the textual data itself informed by CDA—resulted in an extensive understanding of the data, which was increased still further through close reading of all articles in the corpuses. This exploratory process made it possible to identify the dominant discourses around digital games and play in the corpus data, and also facilitated more detailed analysis of texts. The next section looks in more detail at the analytical process and resources of the CDA framework employed in this study.

Social actors approach to critical discourse analysis

As discussed earlier, Van Leeuwen's (2008) 'social actors approach' is influenced by systemic functional linguistics, but Van Leeuwen shifts the framework away from a pure focus on linguistics by developing a 'sociosemantic inventory' of concepts that can be used to analyse data. Rather than focusing only on linguistic meaning potential, as systemic functional linguistics is concerned with, Van Leeuwen's approach looks at semiotic realisations of social practices and social actors. For example, the sociosemantic inventory can be used to examine whether players of digital games are activated or passivated; that is, whether they are represented as subjects who do something *with* games, or as objects that games do something *to*. These concepts offer a powerful means of interrogating the 'recontextualisations' of digital games and play. The process of analysis in Van Leeuwen's social actors approach involves consideration

of a number of elements of social practices, any of which may be represented in texts (Van Leeuwen 2008, pp. 7-12):

1. Participants in the social practice.
2. Actions performed.
3. Performance modes, or how actions can and should be performed.
4. Eligibility conditions (participants), or what makes participants eligible to take part in the practice.
5. Presentation styles, or how participants should present themselves.
6. Times when the practice occurs.
7. Locations where the practice occurs.
8. Eligibility conditions (locations), or what makes locations legitimate sites for this practice.
9. Resources: tools and materials used in the practice.
10. Eligibility conditions (resources), or what makes these resources legitimate for use in the practice.

Examining the arrangements of these elements allows the analyst to break down representations in texts and the alterations of practices entailed by the process. The key point in this social actors approach is that when a social practice is recontextualised, various 'transformations' can occur (Van Leeuwen 2008, pp. 17-21):

1. Substitutions of actual elements of a practice for semiotic ones; e.g. individual participants may be assigned a certain label.
2. Deletions of elements; e.g. certain participants may not be mentioned.
3. Rearrangements of elements; e.g. the order of events may be presented differently from how they actually occurred.
4. Additions of elements, such as repetitions, reactions, legitimations and evaluations.

An evaluation of these transformations is consistent with a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as not merely representation but construction (Foucault 1972). Producers of discourse construct actors, actions and other elements, and this involves choices to emphasise, omit, rearrange, and pass judgment on these elements. To evaluate these transformations of social practices, Van Leeuwen's sociosemantic inventory of terms is used to describe ways in which social actors, action and other elements are recontextualised. Van Leeuwen prioritises the social effect of recontextualisations over their linguistic realisations, acknowledging that, for example, when a social actor is represented as a 'patient' rather than an 'agent', this is not necessarily achieved using

passive grammatical structures (Van Leeuwen 2008, pp. 23-4). The social actors approach to CDA therefore leads with examining the sociological roles assigned in texts before considering how this is achieved linguistically.

The fundamental questions that can be answered using this sociosemantic framework are, in Van Leeuwen's words (2009, p. 158):

1. What kinds of actions are attributed to what kinds of participants?
2. What kinds of actions tend to be objectivated, de-agentialized and so on?

The present study used this framework and sociosemantic inventory of terms to examine the ways in which digital games, play, and players—among other elements—are recontextualised in discourse. This proved to be a fruitful method of addressing the study's research questions, as it allowed for a deep analysis of not just the content of articles but of the specific uses of language that 'recontextualise' games and play.

3 Newspaper constructions of normative players and (de)legitimised play

Before more deeply exploring this study's research questions about the cultural value of digital games and play, it is necessary to first analyse the discursive constructions of players in the data. Given the historically gendered construction of the digital game industry workforce, products, and practices (Chess 2017; Humphreys 2019), it is a reasonable expectation that games and play will not be valued in the same ways for all players. During the course of analysing the newspaper data collected for this study, it became clear that there were significant imbalances in the types of people represented as game players. The analysis of this study's data therefore begins by looking at representations of digital game players in the mainstream newspaper data and considers how constructions of digital play in these publications differ depending on the players involved.

Analysing mainstream media representations of game players is important because these publications have a significant role to play in constructing cultural understandings of social actors, objects, and practices. Play scholar Thomas Henricks (2015, p. 222) puts this in the context of the history of play:

> To declare one's readiness to play is to acknowledge that other commitments have been set aside… [M]any categories of people are not able to make this declaration easily. Historically, authorities have prevented some people from playing publicly or have doled out opportunities within the context of ritualized events. Play's history is one of permissions and prohibitions. It is also a history of people permitting—or denying—themselves the right to play. Many of us feel too busy, serious, or dignified for play's improprieties. Or we allow ourselves to play only in ways that match our broader identities.

As Henricks notes, the ability to play depends to some extent on social and cultural expectations. As this chapter's analysis will establish, this factor is evident in constructions of game players and their play in the newspaper data.

This chapter begins by analysing representations of an overrepresented category of game player: boys and young men. This analysis finds that digital play is considered a 'normal' social practice for this type of player, and furthermore contributes to constructions of a normative young male game player identity. This stands in stark contrast to constructions of digital play engaged in by older and female players. This gendered construction of digital play and its players is further reinforced by exploring representations of sports players, who are represented as digital game players remarkably commonly. However, while digital play is positioned as 'normal' for male youth, this is not to say that digital play is legitimised for this audience. The issue of legitimate play is complex and is explored in this chapter and the next, with these chapters forming a two-part analysis of the legitimation of digital play. This chapter focuses on discourses of pleasurable play and finds that, despite the depiction of digital play as 'normal' for male youth, the practice of digital play is ultimately still constructed as inherently dangerous and harmful to young people's physical and mental health. Immersion, escapism, and addiction are identified as particular sources of anxieties. However, as the chapter then discusses, these same characteristics of play that are used to delegitimise the practice in newspaper coverage are considered highly desirable experiences in enthusiast gaming publications. The contrasting constructions of pleasurable play in mainstream and enthusiast publications results in tensions that cannot be easily resolved.

Digital play and normative player identities

Previous studies of mainstream media coverage of digital games have noted that in earlier decades, particularly the 1980s and 90s, the coverage was often concerned with the negative impacts of games on children (McKernan 2013), and adult play was often considered deviant (Williams 2003). These studies point to a change in the late 90s,

when more positive coverage of digital games emerged. To some extent, this shift is also reflected in the newspaper data collected for this study. It is certainly rare to see traditional stereotypes of digital game players—that they are reclusive, awkward, and so on—presented uncritically in these newspapers. Given the history of often-negative mainstream coverage of games, it is especially noteworthy that these newspapers often construct digital play not as deviant, but as a 'normal' social practice. This suggests a notable shift in coverage compared with previous decades. However, this constructed normality of digital play is highly contingent on the gender and age of represented players. This section analyses how game play is constructed as a 'normal' activity only for boys and young men, and how these newspapers thus construct a limited and exclusive game playing audience.

More than simply associating digital games with male youth, these newspapers construct game play as a key marker of young male identity. Sometimes this is stated outright, as in these examples from the *Daily Mail*: a story about a teenaged stabbing victim states that '[l]ike most teenagers, socialising, computers and games were what he enjoyed' (20 Feb 2014); and in a story about a teenaged professional footballer, we are told that '[o]ff the field, Shaw is a typical teenager, obsessed with gaming consoles' (5 Mar 2014). While an 'obsession' is perceived negatively in some contexts in these newspapers (as is discussed later in this chapter), this article is very positive about Shaw's skills and footballing prospects, and an interest in games simply marks him as a 'typical teenager'. In the above examples, game play is overtly described as a normal part of life for teenagers, but this is also the case with the slightly older Australian tennis player, Bernard Tomic, who is quoted as saying 'I love playing PlayStation, I'm always playing computer games, going to the movies—just doing things any 21-year-old would want to do' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 Jan 2014).

At other times, game play is constructed as a normal activity for young male players in more subtle ways. In a number of cases, a person's enjoyment of games functions as a marker of their own 'normality', and their play is used to help readers relate to and sympathise with them:

- In the *Los Angeles Times* (14 Jan 2014), a story about two children killed in a house fire remembers them by the activities they enjoyed: 'Isabel liked gymnastics and sang in her school's choir, and Alejandro liked to play video games and baseball.' Alejandro's enjoyment of games is used to present him as a relatable boy, one we would recognise from anywhere, and this serves to emphasise the tragedy of the event.
- A sympathetic story in the *New York Times* (20 Mar 2014) about immigration issues profiles an immigrant who arrived in the United States sixteen years ago and has raised a family there. The author also mentions the man's children, and his son is described as a video game player: 'Erik, a high school junior, avidly plays the video game *Call of Duty*, fixes cars (which he learned from his father) and works at a clothing store.' Erik is personalised as a typical and upstanding American teenager. From this sentence we learn that he both works and studies, has a good relationship with his father, enjoys a variety of hobbies, and, as we would expect of a 'typical' teenager, he plays *Call of Duty*.
- Another *New York Times* article covering a stabbing at a Connecticut school (27 Apr 2014) describes the suspect in this way: 'Mr. Plaskon was known as a bit of a jokester who would set off ripples of laughter in class. He enjoyed playing video games and dreamed of playing professional football.' This example is especially notable because it eschews a tactic sometimes found in media coverage of associating digital games with upsetting or concerning events in such a way as to imply causality (examples of this are analysed later in the chapter). Here, the stabbing suspect's enjoyment of games is not stated as an explanation for his actions, but as an indication that the suspect was perceived to be a regular, well-adjusted teenager. Far from being a suspicious activity, his game play is placed alongside his dreams of playing professional football as typical of teenaged boys. His 'normal' enjoyment of games is used to suggest bewilderment at his actions.

In these examples, enjoyment of digital games is used to describe these social actors and make them relatable to readers. In describing these individuals, the articles construct a normative identity, with digital game play as a central element; their interest in digital play is to be expected because of who they are. Nevertheless, this tactic of using game

play to mark normality is confined to a particular kind of person: young and male. In almost every case where game play is used to portray a person as 'normal' and 'typical', that person is young and male. The traditional stereotype of game players being boys and young men[5] is not stated overtly but is realised by the characteristics of individuals. Articulated in the phrases *liked to play*, *avidly plays*, and *enjoyed playing*, the act of digital play is descriptivised (Van Leeuwen 2008, p. 65), meaning it is not something these boys did once or twice, but is or was an ongoing act that partly defines them.

The association of digital play with male youth is particularly clear in newspaper articles that feature a mixture of social actors, such as young and old, or female and male. For example, in the *Los Angeles Times* article cited above (14 Jan 2014), Alejandro liked video games and baseball, while his sister Isabel liked gymnastics and singing. Similarly, in the *New York Times* article about immigration (20 Mar 2014), game play is used to describe Erik but not his sister Nayelly, who instead is described as a 'blossoming basketball star'. In any particular case, of course, one person may play games while another does not, but across the entirety of the newspaper corpus the centrality of youth and maleness to constructions of 'normal' digital play becomes clear. Further examples continue to demonstrate this point. A *Sydney Morning Herald* article (1 Feb 2014) describes a trend of families watching the living room television less often in favour of using new devices like phones and tablets, and presents the Westbury family—two parents, two children—as a typical example. When the author introduces the family members we are told that 'Cooper, 11, and Flynn, 9, are playing computer games or watching YouTube on mini iPads.' Their mother Sally is 'triple screening' with her phone and tablet, but there is no mention of her playing games on them. Similarly, in the *Daily Mail* (24 Mar 2014), we are told that if we are part of a family with two teenagers, 'you probably use the internet for shopping, watching [BBC] iPlayer and renting films. But the kids are likely to use it for playing video games with their friends.' While perhaps a tongue-in-cheek reduction of internet use, this example is

[5] Recent scholarship has shown how this stereotype emerged particularly in the 1980s (Kirkpatrick 2017; Newman 2017).

another clear demonstration of game play being a key element in the construction of a normative young male identity.

Indeed, in some cases an absence of digital games in a boy's or young man's life is portrayed as markedly abnormal. A *New York Times* article (13 Apr 2014) about promising twenty-year-old golfer Jordan Spieth says he is 'playing to a different beat' in that 'Spieth, child of the 1990s, said he had not played a video game in years. This week, he has turned off his phone. He has not watched sports on television'. Games, phones, and watching sports are presented as typical distractions which the golfer avoids, thus making him 'different'. Similarly, a *New York Times* story (25 Apr 2014) about a mixed martial arts fighter implies that a house that lacks digital games is unusual: 'Growing up in Pastor Jones's home, there were no sleepovers, no cable television, no video games. There was church, school and sports'. It should be noted that the absence of digital games in these narratives is considered a positive thing, as the sports players can instead focus on their sporting skills, and this leads to professional success.

These gendered and aged dimensions to representations of digital play in these newspapers are shown most starkly in Figure 3.1 below, which sorts the representations of game players by gender and age. The overwhelming imbalance shows that female players in particular are far less visible in newspaper coverage; as noted on the graph, there are in fact more fictional characters represented as game players than there are actual women and girls. This lack of visibility only serves to perpetuate beliefs that digital game play is 'for' boys and young men, with female players positioned as unusual or as outsiders.

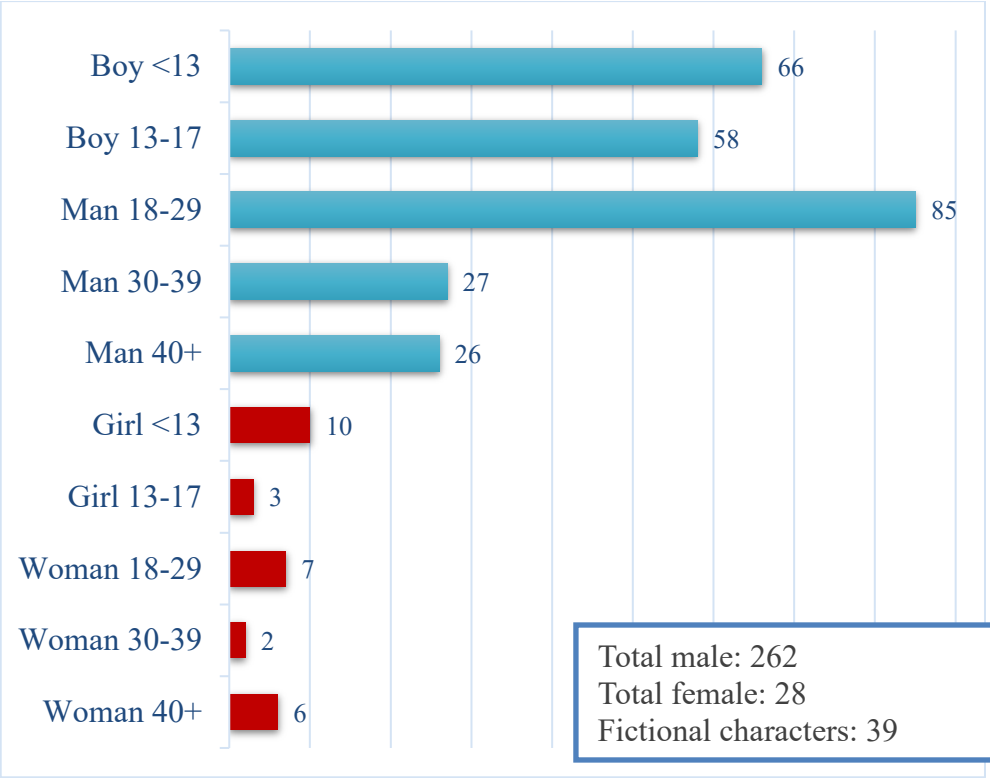


Figure 3.1 Total representations of game players in the newspaper corpus by gender and age, where these details can be ascertained from the articles[6]

The remarkable imbalance in the gender of represented game players, as well as the construction of gaming as 'normal' only for boys and young men, continues to position other audiences on the periphery of games and gaming. Female players and older players are represented much more rarely and more tentatively, reinforcing perceptions that their play is not 'normal'. This analysis affirms a pattern in mainstream media coverage of digital play that normalises young male play and thereby excludes other kinds of players. McKernan (2013) finds that digital game coverage in the *New York Times* from 1980 to 2010 focused predominantly on the effect games have on children, particularly in terms of social threats such as 'dumbing down', violence, and obesity, as well as social benefits like improving hand-eye coordination. As these narratives are concerned with children, game players are generally characterised as young. Williams (2003), in his study of US news magazines from 1970 to 2000, notes that maleness was the 'invisible baseline' (p. 533) of the digital game audience. Age in Williams's study is

[6] These numbers exclude instances of journalists themselves playing games, as in game review articles.

a more complex issue, with adults depicted playing games during the arcade era of the 70s, but child-centric play taking over once home consoles found their place in the 80s. Williams finds that depictions of adult play became more common in the 90s, though the precise age of the adults in his data is not clear. Kirkpatrick (2012) finds that UK game magazines in the 1980s and 90s progress from addressing readers as parents to addressing them as teenaged males, but in any case the game playing audience came to be represented as young and male. Significantly, Kirkpatrick (2017) further argues that sexism in gaming culture was not simply a continuation of sexism in technical computing culture, but instead was established in gaming culture as game companies grew larger and looked to manage risk by cultivating an identifiable young male gaming audience. The construction of digital game players as typically young and male was no accident, and it is clear from the newspaper data explored above that these constructions are still dominant.

It is clear that game players who are not part of the normative young male audience are represented much less often in the newspaper data, but more than this, the representations tend to come with various caveats. In the *Sydney Morning Herald* (8 Mar 2014), we are introduced to Vicky Redd, 'an average(ish) girl whose idea of a perfect day is to sit around in her underwear playing video games and eating jelly babies.' However, Vicky is a fictional comic book character. Also fictional is Tracy Beaker, a character in children's novels written by Jacqueline Wilson, who tells the *Daily Mail* her character 'would like some of the modern computer games' (24 May 2014). These characters are presented in a very positive way—Tracy is called a role model—and game play seems to be understood as a common activity among girls, but instances of real girls playing games are very rare in the newspaper data.

When older adults and particularly women are described playing games, it is never represented as a 'normal' activity as with the young male examples above, and thus these cases are generally qualified in some way, as in the following examples from the *Toronto Star*:

- A columnist describes showing her son a game on her tablet but qualifies the game as ‘idiotic’ and quotes her son calling it ‘such a mom game’ (7 Apr 2014).
- Another journalist describes her experience with brain-training games but points out that she is ‘not one for playing computer games’ (15 Mar 2014).
- A story about a man who runs a food truck quotes him as saying ‘I’m a teenager stuck in a 43-year-old’s body. I still listen to punk rock and play video games’ (17 May 2014).

This last example further highlights the power of the discursive association of games with youth, in that the man’s play makes him ‘a teenager’. Unlike the earlier examples of game play being used to mark a normative young male identity, which point to an acceptance of play, these cases of older adults playing games suggest the same acceptance does not come as easily for this audience—particularly when the players are women. This is especially evident in a number of articles in which women discuss playing so-called casual games on phones and tablets. For example, an author in the *New York Times* (19 Dec 2013) writes:

- ‘For the past couple of months I have been in the thrall of a game called *Candy Crush Saga*. It’s about matching little colored thingies on your iPad or phone. I am not going to explain it in any more depth because that would just make this whole discussion more humiliating.’

The author also quotes her sister who once lied about playing the game because ‘I was too embarrassed to say I was playing *Candy Crush*’ (*New York Times*, 19 Dec 2013). Significantly, the author uses *Candy Crush Saga* (King 2012) to illustrate her argument against legalising internet gambling. *Candy Crush Saga* is ‘free-to-play’, but players can spend money in-game on extra lives or boosters to make the game easier. The author admits to spending $32 on the game in a month and suggests that internet gamblers may spend much more than that if they had the prospect of winning something. By drawing a comparison between *Candy Crush Saga* and internet gambling, the author highlights the addictive or compulsive nature of the game. The source of her embarrassment is that something she clearly deems trivial manages to

'enthral' her to the point of spending both money and significant time on it. The same themes of addiction and embarrassment appear in another *New York Times* article (16 Feb 2014) in which a different author questions the time she spends playing *Candy Crush Saga*. The article is comprised of a series of questions, including:

- 'Why am I embarrassed when someone sees me playing *Candy Crush*, particularly if she is also playing *Candy Crush*? … When I lie to a friend who asks what I'm doing by saying, "I'm on Twitter," and she sees the screen and says, "You're gross," is she right? … Why am I even still playing *Candy Crush* when all the cool kids are talking about *Flappy Bird* [dotGears 2013]? Is there anything more tragic than an outmoded addiction?'

In a very similar vein, an article in *The Sun* (15 Feb 2014) quotes British actor Jennifer Saunders, who speaks of getting 'hooked' on an iPad game called *Jelly Defense* (Infinite Dreams 2011) while on the set of a television show:

- 'The last two nights I've gone to my room, had supper, watched *EastEnders*, got out *Jelly Defense* and before I know it I'm thinking: "F***, what time is it?" Even as I'm talking now, I'm thinking: "I can do better." I've got to build blue towers and red towers to get the coins. It's just pathetic. *Jelly Defense* is a terrible thing.'

The recurring references to addiction here point to a continuity in games discourse from much earlier in the development of the medium. In his study of the formation of early games culture, Kirkpatrick (2013) argues that gaming is imbued with and even defined by contradictions, including that 'it is both therapeutic and unhealthily addictive' (p. 73). While Kirkpatrick studied magazines aimed mainly at young male game players in the 1980s and 90s, the characteristics he identifies are also present in these examples of adult women playing so-called casual games on smartphones and tablets. These players clearly find the games enjoyable, enough to spend hours playing them, and yet the games' 'addictive' nature, along with their suggested triviality, makes the act of playing

them ‘pathetic’, ‘embarrassing’, and ‘humiliating’. Concerning this mixture of feelings, Kirkpatrick (2013, pp. 94-5) writes:

> This ambivalence is constitutive for gaming, by which I mean that the position it has established for itself in the culture is of a practice that is not normal but not really pathological either. A good game treads this boundary well by being dangerously compulsive, mind-bending even, but not so extreme that no one would want to do it.

A similar kind of ambivalence is present in these examples. *Candy Crush Saga* and *Jelly Defense* may be ‘good’ insofar as they are compulsive, but this also causes the players to question the time spent on them. Kirkpatrick (2013, 2016) points out that ‘addiction’ became a marker of quality in gaming discourse through its use in influential gaming magazines, and he argues that ‘[t]he crazed and addicted gamer is, strangely enough, also a normalized subject’ (2016, p. 1449). However, this normalised subject is the ‘authentic gamer’ within gaming discourse, and these women playing casual games are pointedly not ‘authentic gamers’ in the traditional gendered sense of the young male enthusiast[7]. Once removed from an enthusiast gaming discourse, the characteristic of

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[7] In recent years many scholars, journalists, and developers have found the enthusiast gamer identity problematic because it is evidently masculinised and exclusionary. Kirkpatrick’s (2013, 2017) research shows that ‘gamer’ became associated with young male game players not long after the term emerged in the mid-1980s. This association has proved hard to dismantle. Golding and van Deventer (2016, p. 216) argue that the gamer identity even ‘prides itself on difference and exclusivity—and often masculinity’. There is no clearer demonstration of the exclusiveness of the identity than the ‘gamergate’ hate campaign, which can broadly be described as a reactionary pushback against the diversification of games, developers, and player communities. The contested uses of ‘gamer’—as a broad categorising term on the one hand, and as an exclusionary and policed identity marker on the other—is an unresolved tension in digital game discourse.

In these newspapers, ‘gamer’ is used commonly to identify game players but is overwhelmingly used as a genericised category rather than as a descriptive label for specified individuals. A search was conducted for all mentions of ‘gamer/s’ in the newspapers over the seven-month period from which this study’s data was collected. There were 268 uses of the word ‘gamer’ or ‘gamers’ in relation to digital play (including ‘non-gamer/s’) in 183 newspaper articles. Only sixteen of these uses, however, were instances of individual people being identified as gamers. This suggests that the term is a productive way of collectively categorising game players, especially as a segment of a consumer market: gamers are

addiction loses many of its positive connotations; while still an ambivalent term, it becomes much more negative in these examples. The ambivalent role of 'addiction' in gaming discourse is examined in more detail later in this chapter.

The embarrassment resulting from digital play in the above examples complicates Juul's (2010) suggestion that these 'casual' games are a way to make game play more socially acceptable. Games and platforms such as those mentioned above are part of what Juul (2010) calls the 'casual revolution', which purportedly opens up games to everyone. Juul argues that casual game design, including the ability to play in short sessions, removes some of the stigma around games, 'making it easier for us all to say that, "yes, I play video games"' (p. 63). The reactions of these *Candy Crush Saga* and *Jelly Defense* players suggest that countering the stigma is not so simple as expanding the player demographics. Indeed, based on interviews with casual game players, Frans Mäyrä (2015) identifies this same ambivalence, noting that casual play is 'something disgraceful and deniable', 'a waste of time and effort in an era dominated by the ideology of efficiency and productivity' (Mäyrä 2015, p. 329). This is especially noteworthy given that casual games are supposed to appeal to the time-conscious. If, as Kirkpatrick (2013) argues, the addictive element of games—and gaming discourse—is part of what constitutes the form, the stigma surrounding them cannot be so easily countered.

For non-normative players such as older adults and women, digital play requires conscious rationalisations (Deterding 2018; Thornham 2009). Describing casual game play in negative terms such as 'embarrassing' and 'humiliating', as in the examples above, has the effect of distancing the players from their play in a self-effacing way. It is an acknowledgment that digital play is at least perceived to be unusual for these

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consumers, not just players. Examples include 'gamers have three big-name consoles to choose from' (*New York Times*, 13 Feb 2014) and '*Mario Maker* will allow gamers to create and share their own original *Super Mario* levels' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 Jun 2014). In the sixteen cases of individuals identified as gamers there is a similar gender imbalance as exists across the entire newspaper corpus, with only two women labelled as gamers. Otherwise, given the small sample size, few conclusions can be drawn regarding the labelling of specified individuals as gamers.

players, bringing to mind Henricks's observation that 'we allow ourselves to play only in ways that match our broader identities' (2015, p. 222). This is supported by Williams et al. (2009), who suggest that the perception that games are dominated by male players may account for their finding that female players underreport their playing hours more than male players do, due to a desire not to be '"too" into games' (p. 717). In the newspaper corpus, digital play is largely expected and normalised for the traditional assumed audience of boys and young men, whose play is never described in such negative terms. For players outside of this audience, digital play is frequently discussed as a kind of guilty pleasure and something that needs to be excused.

Media representations, such as those in the newspapers collected for this current study, both build on and reinforce cultural understandings of who plays games and, more importantly, who *should* be playing them. The preponderance of male game players in these newspapers both reflects and reinforces the perception that game play is a male-dominated practice, a problematic perception that numerous researchers have drawn attention to and critiqued (Chess, Evans & Baines 2017; Cote 2018; Fisher & Jenson 2017; Jenson & de Castell 2018; Kirkpatrick 2017; Salter & Blodgett 2012; Thornham 2008). For players who are not part of the normalised young male audience, the consequences can be severe and distressing, as when women and girls receive gendered insults or harassment during online game play (Cote 2017; deWinter & Kocurek 2017). Given that the actual game playing audience is very diverse, as has been clear for some time (Entertainment Software Association 2018), the continued normalisation of the young male game player to the exclusion of others is worrisome. To further explore the way these newspapers depict digital play as a masculinised activity, the next section focuses on a specific category of young male game player: professional sports players. Nowhere is the legitimised association between game play and a young male audience more evident than in representations of these players.

Earning the right to play: sportsmen and professional success

Sports players may at first seem like an odd category of social actor to focus on, but they appear frequently in the newspaper data in connection with digital game play, and

representations of them starkly illustrate the analysis above regarding normative player identities. These representations are discussed together here because sports players possess characteristics that inflect constructions of their digital play and need to be considered on their own terms. Specifically, their high social status, their identities as idealised and idolised young men, and their status as professionalised 'players' on the sporting field affect how their digital play is represented. The sports players represented in the newspaper data play a range of sports. The most common are football (soccer) in the UK papers, and basketball and baseball in the US papers, reflecting the popularity and strong media coverage of these sports in these countries, but there are also players of American football, tennis, hockey, rugby, golf, and figure skating in newspapers from all four countries. What all these represented sports players have in common is that they are young and male. There are no sportswomen in the newspaper corpus described as playing digital games. This section analyses the representations of these game-playing sportsmen and argues that their digital play is normalised firstly by their gender and age, as with other young men and boys, but moreover it is 'permitted' by the high social status they have achieved through their success as professionalised players. The effect of these representations of sportsmen is to further cement the normalisation of digital play for young male players.

The articles describing sportsmen typically highlight aspects of the players' lives away from their professions, and their leisure activities serve to make them relatable to readers. Digital game play is most often represented as a recreational activity, as in these examples:

- 18-year-old[8] Brazilian basketballer Bruno Caboclo, playing for the Toronto Raptors: 'While the curiosity factor around Caboclo's background is huge – the short backstory is he's from a poor family in Sao Paolo, enjoys video games and has two older sisters' (*Toronto Star*, 29 Jun 2014).
- 25-year-old American footballer (gridiron) Richard Sherman, of his time in high-school: 'If not homework or sports, then video games, one of his

[8] All ages are at the time of newspaper publication.

obsessions, or Harry Potter, whose books he devoured and whose movie premieres he would attend, at Stanford, at midnight, though never in costume' (*New York Times*, 26 Jan 2014).

- 23- and 21-year-old American basketballers: 'For the players, though, togetherness is as simple as congregating in center Matt Kavanaugh's living room on Caldwell Street for a video game battle between Kavanaugh and forward Devin Oliver' (*New York Times*, 29 Mar 2014).
- 29-year-old Canadian footballer (gridiron) Jon Cornish: 'Deeply immersed in the video game *Monster Hunter*, Cornish heard his iPad making all kind of noise Monday morning just before he was to depart for work' (*Vancouver Sun*, 10 Dec 2013).

Some of the representations overtly connect the act of digital play to a particular age, and in doing so reinforce the earlier analysis that game play is depicted as a 'normal' activity for young men. In the following examples, game play is 'normal kid stuff', for a 'typical teenager', and for 'any 21-year-old':

- 17-year-old Canadian basketballer Chris Egi: 'For two weeks every summer, their home is a basketball-free zone. He reads books, plays video games and does "normal kid stuff"' (*Toronto Star*, 19 Dec 2013).
- 18-year-old English footballer Luke Shaw: 'Off the field, Shaw is a typical teenager, obsessed with gaming consoles and spending time with his great friend and team-mate, Calum Chambers' (*Daily Mail*, 5 Mar 2014).
- 21-year-old Australian tennis player Bernard Tomic: 'I love playing PlayStation, I'm always playing computer games, going to the movies – just doing things any 21-year-old would want to do' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 Jan 2014).

This last example shows a direct quote from the sports player, and there are numerous other examples of sports players discussing their digital play:

- 20-year-old American basketballer Kyle Anderson, discussing 19-year-old teammate Jordan Adams: '"Jordan, he's basic," Anderson said. "He listens to

music. We play video games. He likes to hang out and enjoy the moment. That's him"' (*Los Angeles Times*, 25 Mar 2014).

- 21-year-old French footballer Paul Pogba: 'I prefer to play video games [than watch TV], but I do like to watch the highlights from the NBA' (*Daily Mail*, 31 May 2014).
- 23-year-old competitive figure skater Elladj Baldé: '"We're gamers," said Baldé [of himself and a teammate]. "We can spend hours playing. We're big *Call of Duty* fans"' (*Toronto Star*, 4 Feb 2014).

Quotations such as these point to an important difference between the representations of these sportsmen and those of other categories of social actors, such as the genericised category of 'children' (discussed below). Direct quotations are often reported when the social actors are of high social status (Van Leeuwen 2008, p. 61), so the common use of quotes in these articles about sportsmen reflects their greater social power compared to, say, child game players, who are rarely quoted. This social power is also reflected in the specification of these sportsmen as identified individuals rather than genericised categories such as 'children'.

As indicated by these examples, the sportsmen represented playing digital games are quite young, with ages ranging from 17 to 30. There is only one exception: a story in the *New York Times* (8 Dec 2013) that describes some older (male) golfers, ranging from 24 to 49 years old, playing *Words With Friends* (Zynga 2009) while on the PGA Tour. *Words With Friends* is a 'casual' game for mobile platforms, and it is notable that one of the older golfers, 40-year-old Stewart Cink, is quoted saying that playing the game 'is not something you really talk about with people in your real life … It's kind of like a double life.' This echoes the distancing seen in earlier examples of women playing casual games such as *Candy Crush Saga*, emphasising the need for non-normative game players to justify their play.

Beyond the youth and maleness of the players, the purpose of game play further legitimises the activity. In most cases, game play is presented as recreation without an

instrumental purpose aside from enjoyment, but in the examples below there is an additional reason for playing:

- 21-year-old English footballer Britt Assombalonga: 'I play a lot of games consoles – they just take the pressure off for me. Before the MK Dons game I was on my Nintendo playing *Pokemon*. The things that made me happy as a child have just stayed with me' (*The Sun*, 22 Mar 2014).
- Former English footballer Bryan Robson, discussing current players: 'But now the boys have their DVD box sets and video games. They have more than enough to keep them occupied and their minds off the matches' (*The Sun*, 14 Jun 2014).
- 21-year-old Welsh rugby union player George North: 'I'm not the biggest fan of playing late at night just because it's such a long wait during the day. You do what you can to pass the time – watch TV, movies and play a bit of video games – but the key thing is to rest up and stay off your feet' (*Daily Mail*, 21 Feb 2014).

Digital games 'take the pressure off', 'keep them occupied', and 'pass the time' before a match. The value of play here, and its legitimising purpose, is its role in negating the stress of the more serious play on the sporting field. In Van Leeuwen's framework, this justification is labelled a goal-oriented rationalisation (2008, p. 113-5). Digital play is given a purpose: it is a form of escapism that distracts players from stressful situations. In this regard, digital play is closely tied to their professional play[9]. What begins to emerge here is an indication of a much larger issue regarding the productivity of play. It is significant that in all the examples above there is no suggestion that these sports players are wasting their time, as is sometimes the case when women players are represented, or engaging in a potentially harmful activity, which is sometimes the case with children, as will be discussed below. The sports players' status as successful young men who engage in professionalised play on the sporting field grants them a license to

[9] There are some cases of sportsmen playing digital versions of their own sports, or even a digital version of themselves (*Herald Sun*, 3 Apr 2014; *Los Angeles Times*, 25 May 2014).

engage in digital play as a hobby. As young men, they also have no need for the caveats that tend to qualify women's play. Digital play can be enjoyed simply as a pastime, often without any stated purpose beyond entertainment. When an instrumental purpose for play is stated, it further rationalises the play as an enjoyment and distraction.

However, there are two interesting exceptions to this legitimation of sportsmen's play, and they highlight the issue of productivity. One of these exceptions appears in an article in *The Sun* (26 Jun 2014) titled 'Did we win any games on Xbox, lads?', following England's failure to win any games at the 2014 FIFA World Cup. The English players were gifted Xbox One consoles during the tournament, prompting *The Sun* to publish sarcastic criticism of the players:

- 'Whisper it, but we may have won a game in Brazil after all ... on Xbox. Jack Wilshere and Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain look suitably glum as they land at Luton Airport yesterday. After all, they had put their hearts and consoles into flying the flag for England at the World Cup. Admittedly, the only action crocked Ox was fit for would have been on his video game' (*The Sun*, 26 Jun 2014).

The players' professional failure results in criticism, and their hobby is viewed somewhat dismissively in contrast to the more serious business of performing on the football field. There is a suggestion in the 'hearts and consoles' line that their priorities were not in order. Instead of professional success legitimising their recreational play, here the players' failure delegitimises it, in stark contrast to all the positive representations noted above. The second exception is very similar in that it involves the professional failure of 23-year-old Polish tennis player Jerzy Janowicz:

- 'While high hopes remain for Janowicz, he responded to questions here about his recent slide by lamenting the frustrations he had faced in his favorite video game. If maturity is required to go all the way, good luck to him' (*New York Times*, 26 Jun 2014).

Discussing ‘his favorite video game’ makes Janowicz appear immature in the wake of his ‘slide’ in form. These two examples suggest that, while the pleasurable digital play of sportsmen is almost always represented positively, one of the major reasons for this is the high social status they enjoy because of their success on the sporting field. If the sports players’ status is diminished by professional failure, digital games can quickly be repositioned as symbols of immaturity, triviality, or wastefulness. Even among this group of young men who enjoy high social status, pleasurable play is still contingent upon the continued productivity they demonstrate as successful sportsmen. The importance of productivity to the legitimation of digital play is highly significant and is explored in detail in Chapter 4.

In sum, the sportsmen depicted playing digital games in these newspapers are a specific example of how the normalisation of digital play depends on the gender and age of players. Whereas the digital play of older players and women tends to be qualified in some way, the play of sportsmen almost never is. These young sportsmen not only meet the normative game player criteria of youthfulness and maleness but serve as quintessential examples of these criteria. In its expressions of power and display of male bodies, sport does not simply reflect masculinity but plays a central role in defining it (Messner 1992; Whitson 1990). Many sports function as sanctioned sites of male aggression where participants exert power and dominance, reinforcing a hegemonic masculinity defined in part by these characteristics (Bryson 1994; Messner 1992; Whitson 1990). It is significant, then, that the iconic examples of young men in the above examples can freely discuss their game play in these articles, and it is equally significant that no sportswomen are represented doing the same. This partly reflects the disproportionate interest in men’s sport over women’s sport in mainstream media coverage, but it also results in the association of digital game play with these young male role models more so than with some other categories of social actors, such as sportswomen or indeed women in general. As iconic examples of male youth, these sportsmen have a greater freedom in expressing their play than do most other social actors, and they do so as identified individuals with high social status.

The tensions of problematic and pleasurable play

The analysis thus far has established that digital play is normalised for male youth rather than other kinds of social actors. However, even regarding the over-represented category of young male players, the discursive constructions of the act of play must be further interrogated because normalising game play for a certain audience is not the same as legitimising it. This section shifts from the question of *who* is represented to how, and in what circumstances, digital play itself is (de)legitimised. In newspaper coverage, young people's digital play is still largely presented in terms that echo moral panic discourses regarding children's play from the previous few decades (see Narine & Grimes 2009). Fears about the violent content of games are evident, but more commonly digital play is posited as the cause of physical and psychological health impacts. This section explores these constructions of 'problematic' play and finds that newspaper coverage constructs digital play as inherently harmful. As a result, the fact that digital play is considered ubiquitous among (male) youth only serves to heighten fears about its negative effects on young players. From this analysis, the concepts of immersion, escapism, and addiction are identified as specific sources of anxieties about young people's play. However, these same elements of digital play are central to enthusiast gaming discourses in which they are considered desirable features and experiences. The analysis concludes by arguing that the stark contrasts in the perceptions of immersion, escapism, and addiction between mainstream and enthusiast publications constitute ongoing tensions in constructions of digital play.

The violent content of digital games has been the subject of much mainstream media coverage for a long time (Kocurek 2012), and this coverage is continued in a number of articles in the newspaper corpus. As the following examples show, fears that playing violent games may lead to actual violence are expressed in regard to children's digital play:

- 'A headmaster in South Wales has written to parents warning that pupils as young as six are acting out violent sex scenes from the 18-rated computer game *Grand Theft Auto*' (*The Sun*, 19 Feb 2014).

- ‘Parents are drastically underestimating the potential damage of violent television and video games, researchers told an international conference in Vancouver Tuesday. [Researcher Craig] Anderson says despite a few high-profile supporters of the industry, evidence proves that brutal images influence children’ (*Vancouver Sun*, 7 May 2014).
- ‘Violent video games fuel aggressive behaviour as children grow up, a new report has warned’ (*Herald Sun*, 27 Mar 2014).

In these first few examples, a significant discursive feature is evident that sets apart constructions of problematic play from the constructions of normalised play analysed earlier in this chapter. Articles that normalise digital play for male youth do so by identifying specific individuals; for instance, when the *Daily Mail* (5 Mar 2014) uses an ‘obsession’ with game consoles to signify ‘a typical teenager’ it is describing a specific young footballer, Luke Shaw. But as is demonstrated by the examples above and those that follow, anxieties about young people’s play are almost anyways expressed in relation to genericised categories of players, such as ‘children’, ‘teenagers’, ‘boys’, ‘youngsters’, ‘youth’, and so on. The use of genericised categories is significant because it allows for the expression of various fears about play, such as the violence in the above examples, without needing to provide concrete evidence. As Gorman, Gentile and Green (2018) have pointed out in a recent review of academic literature on ‘problem gaming’, few people who play games actually experience negative effects. Categorising young people by using genericised terms removes actual young people from their experiences of digital play, and so this discursive technique is what allows other social actors, such as journalists or parents, to impose their anxieties upon constructions of the practice. Articles representing the digital play of genericised ‘youth’ are very common in the newspaper corpus. Table 3.1 below shows the number of articles from each newspaper that feature genericised youth as the most prominent category of social actor depicted as game players.

Table 3.1 Number of articles with genericised 'youth' as the most prominent category of social actor represented playing digital games, and as a percentage of total articles collected for each paper

Newspaper	Articles representing genericised youth	Percent of total articles
New York Times	19	5%
Los Angeles Times	7	4%
The Sun	21	13%
Daily Mail	40	26%
Toronto Star	18	13%
Vancouver Sun	13	15%
Herald Sun	25	24%
Sydney Morning Herald	13	16%

Genericised youth is a commonly-represented category of social actor in most of the newspapers, though less so in the US papers. The category is especially prominent in the tabloid newspapers *Daily Mail* (UK) and *Herald Sun* (Australia). This is the category of game player that is represented as most subject to the perceived harmful effects of digital play. In addition to the violent behaviour alluded to in the above examples, the most commonly-cited negative effects of digital play involve physical and emotional health. In particular, the dichotomy of indoor and outdoor play is a recurrent issue:

- 'Teenage boys cooped up in their bedrooms playing computer games have weaker bones than those who enjoy the outdoors, researchers have warned' (*Herald Sun*, 6 Apr 2014).
- 'It is also thought that children spend more time inside on computer games [leading to rickets]' (*The Sun*, 22 Jan 2014).
- 'Even in summer, nearly half of six to 12-year-olds go outside for less than two hours a day – preferring to watch TV and play computer games' (*The Sun*, 23 Apr 2014).
- 'It's a perfect storm of circumstance, this so-called culture of convenience that has turned so many kids into sedentary sloths. Our children are captivated by

technology, the 21st century babysitter, with much of their down time spent bent over a screenful of apps, or connected to video games and movie channels' (*Vancouver Sun*, 22 May 2014).

- 'Youngsters' lifestyles and eating habits have been blamed for the UK's soaring levels of obesity ... Instead of playing outside with friends, they play video games' (*The Sun*, 14 Jan 2014).
- 'Spending hours playing violent video games stunts teenagers' emotional growth, a study has found' (*Herald Sun*, 8 Feb 2014)[10].
- 'But a new Australian-led study has found that increased electronic media use – including tablets and computer games – can lead to poorer psychological health in preschool children' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 Mar 2014).
- 'Public Health England said prolonged periods watching television and playing video games online were linked to higher levels of emotional distress, anxiety and depression' (*Daily Mail*, 26 May 2014).
- 'Researchers at the Karolinska Institute in Sweden found that high use of TV, internet and video games, plus low physical activity and lack of sleep, may increase the risk of mental illness for adolescents as much as drugs and alcohol' (*Daily Mail*, 11 Feb 2014).

The above examples employ what Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 115) calls 'effect orientation', which 'stresses the outcome of actions'. In these examples, digital play is described as having negative effects on young players. Game play is presumed to be a sedentary activity in these examples, raising concerns about young people's physical development, including obesity[11]. The moralising aspect here—that digital play compromises the healthy development of children—takes these examples beyond just a negative evaluation of play and instead delegitimises it (Van Leeuwen 2008, pp. 20-21).

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[10] This article's headline refers to digital games as 'video nasties', reviving a term from a 1980s and 90s moral panic concerning violent horror films released on videotape (Critcher 2003).

[11] McKernan (2013) notes that the concern that games contribute to an obesity epidemic appeared prominently in *New York Times* coverage in the first decade of the 21st century.

Interestingly, fears of psychological harm also feature prominently in these articles, such as the last three examples above. This may in part be an extension of fears about violence, which is often considered a psychological issue, but it also reflects increased academic work done on technology and media use. The last four examples above report on studies or invoke institutional authority to lend weight to these fears, further delegitimising young people's digital play by appealing to 'expert authority' (see Van Leeuwen 2008, p. 107). Physical and psychological health effects are also the subject of letters to the editor such as these:

- 'I hope Mark Cavendish's interview in *The Sun* will make people realise that unless kids take part in physical activities like cycling, running and football – rather than staying indoors on games consoles and smartphones – the childhood obesity epidemic will only worsen' (*The Sun*, 9 Apr 2014).
- 'Father Christmas, please don't bring children computer games or PlayStations – it's wrecking their brains' (*Herald Sun*, 10 Dec 2013).

While an interest in the effects of digital play is often used to delegitimise the activity, effect orientation is rarely used to legitimise it. In other words, the *inherent* effects of digital play on young people are overwhelmingly constructed as negative. Among articles that feature genericised youth as the most prominent category of social actor, only two of them propose positive inherent effects on young people. One is tentative and the other is sceptical:

- 'Increasing teetotalism among teenagers may be partly explained by the growing popularity of social media and online gaming'[12] (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 Apr 2014).
- 'Shoot-'em-up action computer games boost kids' maths skills and concentration, US scientist Daphne Bavelier claims' (*The Sun*, 17 Feb 2014).

[12] The study mentioned in this article (Livingston 2014) cites a conference paper (Ramstedt 2013, cited in Livingston 2014) which found increased use of social media and online games was associated with lower rates of drinking. The suggestion is that alcohol-related pastimes may have been displaced to some extent.

Digital play is legitimised here by its effect, but weakly. While the latter article offers a counterpoint to commonly-cited negative effects of digital play, there are two things to note. First, the entire article is a mere fifteen words long, and second, the use of the verb 'claims' introduces some scepticism compared with an alternative formulation, such as 'a study has found', thus reducing the expert authority of the scientist. When it comes to cognitive and physical effects of game play on genericised young people, the UK newspapers in particular lean heavily to the negative side.

This negative slant becomes very clear by considering the balance of articles that cite either positive or negative consequences of digital play for young players. In articles that involve genericised youth, the *effect* of digital play is a common focus, and it is here that the most negative portrayals of digital play are found. While the numbers of negative portrayals differ across the newspapers (see Table 3.2 below), in total about half the articles that feature genericised youth involve perceived negative consequences of digital play, while far fewer articles present positive consequences. Most articles citing positive outcomes focus on a deliberate purpose for play such as educational benefits (this will be analysed in detail in Chapter 4), while articles citing negative outcomes employ 'effect orientation', as in most examples above. In other words, the negative outcomes are presented as a harmful side-effect, which results in digital play being constructed as dangerous. There are some examples of genericised young people playing games for enjoyment without any mention of negative effects, but here their play is bundled with an additional purpose:

- 'When travelling with kids, parents know that waiting in line can make the calmest of kids get a little stir-crazy. To avoid this, make sure to carry a few boredom busters in your carry-on luggage, especially for the kids. Magazines, books, puzzles, word games, video games or a deck of cards don't take a lot of space and are great at keeping everyone occupied' (*Toronto Star*, 14 Dec 2013).
- '[T]his award-winning exhibition [DigiPlaySpace] features robots, video games, neat installations and more to keep the kids busy, learning and playing with technology … But one of the loudest and most fun activities was Super Pong, a

mash-up of foosball and the classic video game where up to eight players can join in on the fun, each controlling a knob that corresponds to paddles on the screen' (*Toronto Star*, 7 Mar 2014).

- '[T]here are so many innovative choices lining shelves this season that parents aren't likely to hear the words 'I'm bored' until spring break … Bring the nostalgic appeal of '80s arcade video games to the comfort of your living room. This collectible Pac Man-shaped joystick includes 12 classic games and the exclusive Level 256 game that begins where the original *Pac-Man* [Namco 1980] left off' (*Vancouver Sun*, 11 Dec 2013).

In these examples, digital play keeps children occupied and prevents boredom. Little attention is paid to children's experiences, and instead their play is a tool for parents to keep them under control. Also of note here is that while these articles mention genericised youth as playing and enjoying games, the authors of the articles are also much more present. They inform us from their own experience that the games are fun, appealing, and entertaining. This is to be expected, perhaps, when the articles involve a subjective experience like fun and are aimed at adult readers, but it is notable that the authors themselves tell us a game is fun rather than allowing young people to legitimise their own play on this basis, such as via a quote. Young people's agency is denied in favour of a parental approach to managing their play.

Table 3.2 Number of articles presenting negative and positive consequences of digital game play when genericised youth is the primary category of social actor represented

Newspaper	Negative consequences	Positive consequences
New York Times	2	2
Los Angeles Times	2	1
The Sun	11	2
Daily Mail	29	0
Toronto Star	3	5
Vancouver Sun	8	4
Herald Sun	12	2
Sydney Morning Herald	7	2
Total	74	18

Along with ‘effect orientation’ and ‘expert authority’, a third discursive technique that delegitimises children’s digital play is the ‘authority of tradition’, which legitimises or delegitimises practices by pointing out the way things have ‘always’ been done (Van Leeuwen 2008, p. 108). When concerns are raised about the use of modern technology like digital games, the articles may contrast current practices or events with those of an earlier time:

- ‘When I was a kid there were four TV channels and the clunky games consoles cost a fortune [making it easier to be active] … I know there are endless distractions for kids, such as iPads and PlayStations, but there is room in life for those things and for physical activity too’ (*The Sun*, 7 Apr 2014).
- ‘Children do 20 per cent less physical activity than youngsters did in the 60s due to the lack of PE at school and the popularity of computer games and TV’ (*Daily Mail*, 28 Dec 2013).
- ‘However, their children prefer to get their kicks from a screen, by playing computer games, surfing the internet or watching TV. Some 36 per cent of today’s children get their entertainment from a screen, compared with just 8 per cent in the Eighties’ (*Daily Mail*, 21 Mar 2014).
- ‘I treasured my tea set, decorated with roses, and held tea parties for fairies and imaginary friends in those innocent days before TV and electronic games, using real tea, milk and sugar’ (letter to the editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 Jan 2014).

As these examples show, digital games often do not appear in isolation; game play tends to be part of a broader concern about young people’s use of technology, particularly ‘screen’ use. In various examples above, smartphones and tablets are mentioned alongside games and consoles, while television viewing and general internet use are also commonly cited. The construction of digital games as a form of technology has been a constant throughout their history (Newman 2017) and so they have been a ‘lightning rod’ (Williams 2003) for anxieties stemming from the increased prominence of technology in people’s lives. The individualised design of advanced technologies

such as smartphones and tablets, and the increased flexibility they afford for media viewing, internet use, and game play (including private use rather than social use in family environments), further adds to these anxieties.

In addition to the various strategies of delegitimation, there are also differences in the way the social action of digital play is constructed in these articles featuring young players. Below are two contrasting examples taken from those already mentioned above. The first highlights negative effects of play, while the second highlights positive purposes both for parents (controlling children) and for young people (enjoyment):

- 'Public Health England said prolonged periods watching television and playing video games online were linked to higher levels of emotional distress, anxiety and depression' (*Daily Mail*, 26 May 2014).
- '[T]here are so many innovative choices lining shelves this season that parents aren't likely to hear the words 'I'm bored' until spring break … Bring the nostalgic appeal of '80s arcade video games to the comfort of your living room. This collectible Pac Man-shaped joystick includes 12 classic games and the exclusive Level 256 game that begins where the original *Pac-Man* left off' (*Vancouver Sun*, 11 Dec 2013).

While there is not a great amount of detail in either, the act of play in the first example is more abstracted (see Van Leeuwen 2008, p. 68). Play is only realised in the phrase 'playing video games online', and this abstraction holds for most of the articles about negative effects. In the second example, the act of play involves choosing a game from the shelf, bringing it home to the living room, and playing it for a specific purpose. Further, some details of the game are provided, and it holds 'nostalgic appeal' (presumably for the parents). It is generally the case that digital play is more abstracted in articles that emphasise negative effects of play, and is somewhat more 'concretised' in articles that highlight positive outcomes due to the addition of purposes or experiences (this is not the case for the two examples of positive 'effect orientation' articles mentioned above, in which play is similarly abstracted, but there are very few of those in the corpus). In all the articles discussed thus far, the actual players—

genericised youth—have their agency heavily restricted, and this is particularly so when the act of play is abstracted. Play is presented as a nebulous act with few details. Readers are required to fill in the gaps, and so digital play is subject to preconceptions which may be shaped by a long history of negative portrayals.

The above analysis has shown that young people's pleasurable play is often delegitimised in these newspapers' coverage, and through the use of effect orientation young people's play is constructed as inherently harmful. In the representations explored thus far, there are some indications of the specific aspects of digital play that contribute to the construction of it as dangerous, such as excessive play times. The following section considers this in further detail, and identifies immersion, escapism, and addiction as aspects of digital play that are positioned as especially problematic.

Dangerous play in newspaper coverage

The representations of children's digital play discussed above show clear concerns about excessive play leading to poor physical health, as with the description of 'many kids' as 'sedentary sloths' (*Vancouver Sun*, 22 May 2014), and poor psychological health, as with the suggestion of a link between mental illness and 'high use' of screen-based media including games (*Daily Mail*, 11 Feb 2014). Violence also remains a significant element in the construction of children's digital play, as in a report that 'violent video games fuel aggressive behaviour' (*Herald Sun*, 27 Mar 2014). Only rarely are games openly blamed for actual acts of violence; usually the role of games in these events is somewhat more complex or indirect than a straightforward causative link between virtual and actual violence. Even a *Daily Mail* column (27 Dec 2013) that warns parents about games 'desensitising' children and rails against 'the depravity' of violent games also says the following:

- 'But it's not so much what video games will make your child do, it's what the hours spent on this empty pursuit will stop them from doing. They lose out on the vital skills that can only be learnt by interacting with the real world, such as verbal skills, resilience and self-knowledge' (*Daily Mail*, 27 Dec 2013).

This focus on excessive 'screen time' is common in constructions of children's play. But there are evidently some aspects of digital game play that are perceived as more harmful than other forms of screen time such as television. The *Daily Mail* column demonstrates this when it describes a preadolescent boy playing a violent game:

- 'We didn't see him for two days as he sat transfixed in his bedroom, virtually uninterrupted by his parents. It amazed me to see a boy, who was usually itching to leave the dining table after 20 minutes, happily sitting for five-hour stretches without moving from the spot' (*Daily Mail*, 27 Dec 2013).

This article focuses on a characteristic of digital play that features commonly in discursive constructions of young people's play: its capacity to absorb, transfix, and immerse. A usually restless boy sitting quietly for hours could easily be construed as a good thing, but the author's amazement in the above quote is not a positive reaction. Instead she is disturbed by children being so absorbed in 'virtual killing sprees in their bedrooms' (*Daily Mail*, 27 Dec 2013). In addition to the virtual violence, the setting of the bedroom situates the act of play apart from controlled, surveillable family spaces, further adding to the sense of danger. Taken together, these representations form an image of young people absorbed in digital play for long periods of time to the point of facing negative consequences. The lack of agency given to children in these representations means digital play is constructed as controlling and inherently dangerous, as in the statement that 'children are captivated by technology' (*Vancouver Sun*, 22 May 2014). A *Herald Sun* article (16 May 2014) that suggests 'some children are overdosing on the internet and computer games' uses the language of drug addiction to alarm readers about the control these media have over young users.

These problematic aspects of digital play are particularly evident in newspaper coverage of a number of young men who have carried out actual acts of lethal violence[13]. While these are extreme examples, the association of digital games with actual killings perpetrated by young men demonstrates how digital play is positioned as harmful not simply because of its virtual violence, but primarily on the basis of its absorbing, compelling qualities. The clearest example is media coverage of 22-year-old Elliot Rodger, who on 23 May 2014 carried out a mass killing in Isla Vista, California. This occurred within the data collection period for this study, and several newspaper articles published at this time mention Rodger's interest in digital games. Below are three examples, from the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and the UK's *Daily Mail*:

- 'Before long, he withdrew from class work into *World of Warcraft*, the online interactive video game that had become his obsession' (*New York Times*, 2 Jun 2014).
- 'He was a shy, spoiled, social misfit who was targeted by bullies. A boy with intense longings and no way to make sense of the world. A mentally unbalanced teenager who for years spent up to 15 hours a day immersed in *World of Warcraft*, a video game "full of mystery, magic and endless adventure," its website promised. Buy into that, and you become a heroic fantasy character and share a virtual world online with strangers. But you never talk to an actual girl, unless she's a friend of the family' (*Los Angeles Times*, 3 Jun 2014).
- 'Rodger's manifesto, titled My Twisted World, makes clear he was already intent on a massacre, apparently driven to kill by a seething resentment of young women. He described how childhood fixations with being popular were replaced with a retreat into violent online games, which saw him spend up to 14 hours a day playing games including *World Of Warcraft*' (*Daily Mail*, 26 May 2014).

[13] Because the newspaper articles collected for this study were found by searching for 'digital/video games' and related terms, the analysis here only aims to explore the discursive representations of the relationship between these killers and their game play. It is not intended as an analysis of the newspapers' overall coverage of these events.

The language used in these articles reveals the aspects of digital play deemed to be harmful. While the *Daily Mail* article seems to classify *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) as a 'violent online game', it is not primarily violent content that is problematic. While *World of Warcraft* involves a great deal of virtual killing, its cartoonish visuals give its violence a very different character compared with the more realistic aesthetic of, say, the *Call of Duty* game series, which appears in further examples below. Instead, the main concern is the excessive amount of time Rodger reportedly spent playing games, and what this implies about his relationship with the 'real' world. Similarly, in the weeks following Rodger's attacks, the *Vancouver Sun* (10 Jun 2014) published an article by a psychotherapist describing a number of his young male clients as alienated, narcissistic, angry, and 'obsessed with violent video games'. Again, virtual violence features in this description, but it is young men's 'obsession' with these games that portrays their play as especially worrisome.

In these articles, long play times are associated with Rodger's mental state. While the articles do not explicitly suggest that games are to blame, the *Daily Mail* does come close in another article about Rodger. The article, after discussing a website Rodger had used to discuss his hatred of women, ends with a non sequitur: 'Public Health England said prolonged periods watching television and playing video games online were linked to higher levels of emotional distress, anxiety and depression' (*Daily Mail*, 26 May 2014). The vague implication seems to be that the game may have influenced his actions. For the most part, however, digital play is not considered the cause of Rodger's violence; rather it is symptomatic of his social awkwardness, isolation, and his fear of rejection, especially by women. Faced with social difficulties, he became *immersed in* and *obsessed with* digital games; he *retreated into* games; he *withdrew from* his real-world responsibilities. Rodger's excessive *World of Warcraft* play is presented as an escape from reality.

Game play is treated very similarly in articles about other killers. Articles in the *New York Times* and *Toronto Star* describe a final police report on the Sandy Hook school shooting carried out by 20-year-old Adam Lanza in December 2012. Again, game play is presented as symptomatic of Lanza's social isolation:

- ‘[T]he account provided the most detailed report yet about Mr. Lanza's final months – his bedroom windows covered with black trash bags, as he was preoccupied with video games and communicated with his mother only through email, even though they were on the same floor’ (*New York Times*, 28 Dec 2013).

The *Toronto Star* (30 Dec 2013) likewise notes Lanza’s ‘social isolation’ and ‘preoccupation with violent video games’. In the days following Elliot Rodger’s killing spree, Lanza was also mentioned in a *Daily Mail* article (28 May 2014) that focuses on *Call of Duty*, which we are told ‘has been linked to a series of high profile murders in recent years’. *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2009) is presented mainly as a training tool—the article is titled ‘Game that “trained” Breivik for murder’—and the article does not explicitly claim a causative link between virtual and actual violence. But nor can the article be removed from a long history of fears about violent games leading to actual violence, and the repetition of examples certainly implies a close connection:

- ‘Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik boasted that he “trained” for up to 16 hours a day on the game before his killing spree in July 2011 …

  ‘Military veteran Aaron Alexis, who killed 12 people at the Washington Navy Yard in the US capital last September, was also said to play video games, including *Call of Duty*, for up to 16 hours a day.

  ‘French terrorist Mohammed Merah played the game in the days before killing three soldiers and four civilians, including a rabbi and three children, in Toulouse in March 2012.

  ‘Adam Lanza, who murdered 20 children and six staff at Sandy Hook school in Connecticut in the US in 2012 before killing himself, was also said to be obsessed with violent video games’ (*Daily Mail*, 28 May 2014).

In the constructions of these killers in these examples, violence forms one aspect of somewhat more complicated social and psychological issues involving mental health and players' lack of involvement in the 'real' world. All the examples above—covering Rodger, Lanza, and others—consider the long play times to be the worrying factor. Playing games for sixteen hours a day is considered not simply unhealthy but indicative of improper social functioning. As with Rodger's *World of Warcraft* play, which represents an escape from the real world, Lanza's excessive game play in a darkened bedroom helps to construct him as 'a strange, strange 20-year-old' (*Toronto Star*, 30 Dec 2013). As with the construction of young people's play discussed earlier, the act of play is abstracted, which elides any detail about the players' motivations or experiences. Their play is constructed only in this language of anti-social obsession.

The point here is not to challenge any of these representations of mass killers but rather to consider how their game play is deployed in these representations and what this indicates about perceptions of digital play. The key elements in these constructions are the high play times (or 'obsession') and their lack of engagement with the world outside of games; in other words, their immersion in game play and their concomitant escape from the 'real' world. Connected as it is here to such violent crimes, digital play carries a sense of inherent danger. Immersion and escapism are closely connected to each other because the concept of immersion rests on a dichotomy of real and virtual worlds. Dovey and Kennedy (2006, p. 106) note 'a particular discourse of transcendence' vis-à-vis digital technology, which they attribute to the legacy of Cartesian dualism. Interacting with digital technology such as games, social media, the web, messaging apps, and so on is often thought of as a process of leaving the real world and entering a virtual one (hence the common phrase 'in real life'). Our bodies are left behind and our minds, to some extent at least, go to a different place. This split between the real and the virtual worlds is why Rodger's and Lanza's excessive play time, their immersion in and obsession with games, is presented as such a concern. These killers were not just socially isolated; they were immersed in virtual worlds for long periods, and as a result

are described as not properly engaged with the real one. This separation from reality heightens the depiction of these young men as strange and dangerous[14].

The centrality of excessive play to constructions of both young players and the violent young men discussed above results in the formation of a narrative about the perceived problematic influence of games in young people's lives. Digital play is depicted as obsessive, immersive, and escapist. These aspects, especially when combined with the presence of virtual or actual violence, invests play with a sense of danger. A discursive line forms from excessive children's play through to the social separation and isolation of violent young men. It is significant that these killers are young men, a category of social actor for whom digital play is constructed as 'normal'. While these specific young men may not be considered 'normal', their excessive and obsessive play certainly is. The problematising of these aspects of digital play is significant because these elements are discussed in very different ways in other contexts. The next section uses data from enthusiast game websites to consider how immersion, escapism, and addiction feature commonly in enthusiast game discourse as pleasurable and desirable features of games.

Pleasures of immersive, escapist, and addictive play

Discourses of dangerous digital play centre on the construction of it as obsessive and immersive. This represents an important collision between mainstream and enthusiast discourse, since these same characteristics of play are generally considered by enthusiasts to be important, positive, and desired features. The desirability of immersion, escapism, and addiction is evident in the enthusiast game websites collected for this study, and this data is explored here in order to illuminate the conflicting

[14] Interestingly, studies by Williams, Yee, and Caplan (2008) and Johnson, Gardner, and Sweetser (2016) found that immersion as a motivation for game play is actually associated with *less* playing time compared to other motivations, such as sociability and achievement. The authors of these studies express some surprise at this result, which further indicates a widespread assumption of a link between immersive play and long play times, even if this is not borne out in research.

constructions of danger and pleasure around these characteristics. The consequence of these discursive conflicts is that these features of digital play are likely to remain focal points in mainstream media given the anxieties outlined above.

Immersion in particular is treated as a universally positive concept in the enthusiast websites and is discussed as an experience that games can and should provide. The examples below show a few of these positive perceptions of immersion, and include not just the voices of journalists but also those of game developers, who discuss the goal and process of enabling immersion:

- A game developer discussing his game *Alien: Isolation* (Creative Assembly 2014): 'As much as possible we've tried to create that atmosphere, everyone will be wearing headphones to help create that immersion so you're not distracted by everything that's going on all around you' (*Eurogamer*, 28 Mar 2014).
- A journalist describing his experience with *Demon's Souls* (FromSoftware 2009): 'I extracted perverse satisfaction and immersion from negotiating its labyrinthine systems, and rising to its vertiginous challenges' (*Eurogamer*, 23 Mar 2014).
- A game developer describing what he wants to see from games in the future: 'Take me to new places, let me live through new experiences, engage me and immerse me in your worlds' (*Eurogamer*, 2 Jan 2014).
- A journalist describing 'the dream' of virtual reality: 'Ever since we first walked down a corridor in *Wolfenstein 3D* [id Software 1992], we've dreamed of removing the greatest barrier to immersion in that experience—the monitor screen sitting in front of our faces, a flat, frustrating window that separates us from the increasingly beautiful and compelling worlds behind its dull glass' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 21 Mar 2014).
- A *Gamespot* article recapping what its staff felt were some of the best games of 2013: '*State of Decay* [Undead Labs 2013] serves up a near-constant barrage of suspense and immersion that leaves even the briefest jaunts away from your home base tinged with the threat of death' (*Gamespot*, 5 Dec 2013).

- *Gamespot* describing *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (Ubisoft 2013), which the website's staff awarded 'game of the year' on Xbox One: 'It all comes together to create a spectacular and deeply immersive adventure' (*Gamespot*, Dec 2013).
- A journalist describing two stealth games: 'Though *Thief* [Eidos Montréal 2014] and *Dishonored* [Arkane Studios 2012] offer slightly different power fantasies, they still strive to create immersive first-person experiences within authentic worlds' (*Gamespot*, 26 Feb 2014).
- A developer explaining the process of creating a virtual reality game: 'The immersion-breaking factor is the keyboard. We thought OK, until there's something like a kinetic interface for your hands, let's just try and minimize the keyboard interaction so we don't break the immersion' (*Polygon*, 19 May 2014).
- A developer describing his 1993 adventure game *The 7th Guest* (Trilobyte 1993): 'It was just all adding to the sense that this was a real haunted house. I think people got really immersed in that and being frightened. That was just awesome' (*Polygon*, 4 Dec 2013).

The experience of immersion is addressed directly in a *Eurogamer* opinion piece that posits immersion as a defining characteristic of digital games: 'More than any other medium, video games have the power to truly immerse us in another world' (*Eurogamer*, 8 Mar 2014). The conceptualisation of immersion as an experience of transportation to another place clearly has a great deal of currency among players, developers, and game journalists. Game discourses frequently depict game content as 'virtual worlds', and as such the games are conceived of as *places* that players can enter and explore. Another *Eurogamer* article (18 Apr 2014) makes this clear when it lauds the 2011 game *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) as the greatest realisation of 'the desire to create a world at the resolution of reality itself' and describes the game's virtual world as 'somewhere to live in'. For the author, this is more than just one particular style of game. *Skyrim*'s vast, detailed world is described as 'the finest expression of video games fulfilling their true (and unique) potential', and the author positions the game as the culmination of three decades of game development. The concepts of immersion, game worlds, and so on are central to enthusiast game discourses, to the point that, in this example, they are constitutive of the medium. This point is explored further in Chapter 7's analysis of how immersive experiences enabled

by virtual reality technology are positioned as the 'dream' of enthusiasts. Dovey and Kennedy (2006) point out that promises of immersion are not in fact unique to games but have been part of the construction of other media forms too, as have 'particular kinds of anxiety around readers/viewers/users/players who are *too* immersed' (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, p. 9).

The idea of 'living' in a game world invokes the notion of escapism, and this concept is likewise treated as a very positive experience in enthusiast websites. For example, a *Eurogamer* article (16 Mar 2014) states that 'games often serve as a wonderful source of escapism', while a *Gamespot* article (4 May 2014) states that 'many of us use video games as a form of escapism, as a chance to live out our dreams and fantasies'. This claim that games allow players to live out dreams positions escapism as a fundamentally positive and aspirational experience, rather than one tinged with negativity, as when the goal is to escape 'real world' problems. However, the ability to escape from life's problems is also treated as a very positive aspect of game play. In a *Polygon* article (5 Mar 2014), a transgender woman writes that, for people who identify as trans, 'the virtual world is one of very few places we can safely escape to be ourselves', and she puts a twist on the concept of escapism by describing game play as an escape *into* reality.

While escapism is a desirable aspect of game play for many people writing for these enthusiast websites, there is an awareness that the concept can be treated differently elsewhere. A *Polygon* article (20 Mar 2014) praising the game *Papers, Please* (3909 2013) describes the 'mainstream view of games' as 'frivolities and dumb escapism'. This example demonstrates the different perceptions of escapism—an experience that is highly valued by some but seen as trivial and unimportant by others—and points to anxieties about wider societal perceptions of digital play. As the analysis of newspaper coverage has shown, escapism can also carry a sense of danger. In constructions of problematic play, immersion and escapism can represent a separation from the 'real' world and can be symptomatic of abnormal behaviour, as with the violent young men discussed above, or the boy who sat 'transfixed' by his games for hours when he normally would not sit still. These concerns are heightened when play is deemed to be 'excessive', and this raises the highly ambivalent concept of addiction.

Addiction is another aspect of the construction of digital play that is deployed very differently in enthusiast discourse. However, it differs from immersion and escapism in that, even among enthusiasts, addiction is simultaneously pleasurable and dangerous. For many players, an addictive game is a good game; a typical example is *Gamespot*'s description of a game as 'a whole lot of addictive fun' (17 Apr 2014). But an addictive game can also be worrisome, not only for outside observers such as parents but also for players themselves. Kirkpatrick (2013) identifies addiction as a 'constitutive ambivalence' of gaming because of how central it was to formative discourses of gaming culture in the magazines he studied. A *Eurogamer* article about *Candy Crush Saga* is illustrative of this ambivalence. This so-called casual game has been both praised and criticised for its addictive qualities. Being addictive is good insofar as the game is engaging, but its reputation for taking over players' lives—and encouraging them to keep spending money on the game—has been a common criticism. *Eurogamer* included it in their list of the best games of 2013, and the article addresses the issue of addiction in this way: 'Yes, it's addictive, but all the best games are' (*Eurogamer*, 24 Dec 2013). This is a concise summation of the place of addiction in enthusiast gaming discourse; it is simultaneously a marker of a good game and something that must be treated with caution. In an attempt to reconcile this ambivalence, the author, in an accompanying YouTube video, treats the game's addictive qualities light-heartedly: 'I hope you've enjoyed *Candy Crush* as much as I have and aren't finding that it's soullessly destroying your whole life. Alright bye!' A *Eurogamer* article describing both *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) and *Bejeweled* (PopCap Games 2001) as 'mercilessly addictive' (26 Jan 2014) likewise captures the combination of appeal and danger. A *Gamespot* writer describes *Dota 2* (Valve 2013) as his 'game of the year' which he has played for 500 hours, and then writes 'there's probably some level of a psychologically crippling addiction in that' (*Gamespot*, 18 Dec 2013). An addictive game is enjoyable but needs to be played in moderation. When the same *Gamespot* journalist writes that he had to quit *World of Warcraft* 'because I simply found it too addictive' (*Gamespot*, 3 Mar 2014), he essentially suggests the game is a bit *too* good.

The ambivalence of addiction notwithstanding, the desirability of immersive, escapist, and addictive experiences is clear in enthusiast discourse. This has important ramifications for mainstream media coverage of digital play, because these same experiences that players demand and developers aim to deliver are fundamental to the construction of young people's play as dangerous. It should not be assumed that mainstream media coverage will eventually simply 'move on' from expressing these fears about young people's play. Instead, there is ongoing contestation around enthusiasts' positive evaluation of immersive, escapist, and addictive play, and the delegitimation of play on the same grounds. The strategies of delegitimation outlined in this chapter are therefore likely to persist while digital play remains a fixture of young people's leisure activities.

Conclusion

This chapter's analysis of newspaper coverage has highlighted how digital play is constructed as an activity engaged in by young male players far more than other types of players. Young men and boys are normalised digital game players, whereas women and older players are positioned as outsiders who may engage in play, but more rarely and sometimes apologetically. At a time when there is more awareness of gender inequalities in access to and representation within games, the continued assumptions in media coverage that digital play is a young male activity—assumptions which are then perpetuated by that coverage—need to be addressed.

However, the overrepresentation and normalisation of young male players does not mean their play is legitimised. In fact, the understanding that digital play is 'typical' for male youth feeds the anxieties about digital play raised in these newspapers. If almost all boys are understood to play games, the belief that digital play is inherently harmful to physical and mental health is considered especially worrying. When young people are represented playing digital games as a pastime, for pleasure, play is frequently depicted as excessive, immersive, escapist, and addictive. But these elements of digital play are perceived very differently in mainstream media as compared to enthusiast media. Being immersed in a game can be desirable or worrying. Escaping via digital play can be

alluring or irresponsible. Addictiveness marks both a good game and a dangerous one. In enthusiast websites these are positive qualities, and form part of the evaluative discourse of games. But in newspaper coverage these same characteristics form the basis of the delegitimation of especially young people's play. As the examples of sportsmen's digital play show, the kind of social actor involved is an important factor in how play is portrayed; however, even sportsmen's play is cast as trivial and harmful when it is not 'earned' through professional success. The digital play that allows sportsmen to escape from stress (*The Sun*, 22 Mar 2014; 14 Jun 2014) is recast as an abdication of professional responsibility or a waste of their talent (*New York Times*, 26 Jun 2014; *The Sun*, 26 Jun 2014).

Discourses of pleasurable play therefore exist in an ongoing state of tension and contingency. Because concepts like immersion, escapism, and addiction are so important to enthusiast game discourse, these tensions cannot be easily resolved. The fact that these pleasurable experiences of games form the basis of the construction of problematic play in newspaper coverage shows that they are central to mainstream cultural understandings of digital play. Given the anxieties about these sources of pleasure, it is notable that these concepts have much in common with discourses of drug use. From the transcendent nature of immersion, to the self-indulgence of escapism, to the often-addictive nature of the activity, the similarities to drug use are clear, and further feed into concerns about dangerous play. The construction of game play as escapist is further bound up with the perception that digital play is wasteful. To escape from 'reality' is to abdicate real world responsibilities, as with Elliot Rodger, whose 'retreat' into *World of Warcraft* was also a 'withdrawal' from his class work. When digital play is conceived of as immersive and escapist it represents a disconnection from reality and a temporary rejection of social expectations and responsibilities. From this analysis an important question emerges: under what circumstances is play legitimised? The next chapter answers this question by exploring the importance of productivity to the legitimation of digital play.

4 The harnessing of play: games for education, work, and health

This chapter continues to explore the value of digital play in mainstream discourse by analysing the newspaper data corpus. The previous chapter established that pleasurable digital play is generally devalued and delegitimised in mainstream newspaper coverage. Young people's digital play is constructed as 'normal', but it is also a focus for anxieties about their physical and emotional development. The pleasurable play of non-normative players such as women and older men is presented ambivalently, such as with expressions of embarrassment. While pleasurable play is delegitimised in these ways, mainstream newspaper coverage nonetheless legitimises digital play in some circumstances, and these grounds of legitimation are the focus of this chapter. To explore the questions of how, why, and for whom digital play is legitimised, the newspaper corpus was examined to identify instances where newspaper coverage presents digital play as a positive and legitimate social practice. To do this, Van Leeuwen's (2008) critical discourse analysis tools were used to explore the 'discursive recontextualisations' of digital play (social actions) and players (social actors). By analysing the newspaper corpus in this way, the chapter shows how digital play is legitimised according to the values of the field of power (Bourdieu 1993) which structure, and are expressed within, mainstream news discourse.

Using this approach revealed that newspaper coverage legitimises digital play as a valuable social practice when it is performed for 'instrumental' purposes; that is, when play is performed in order to achieve a goal beyond the act of play itself. This chapter identifies three major instrumental uses of games that are legitimised in newspaper coverage: play for educational purposes, play as a form of work, and play for health

benefits. By legitimising instrumental play on the basis of its relevance to valued cultural fields such as health and education, newspaper coverage constructs digital play as 'productive' rather than 'wasteful'. As the chapter argues, the 'productivity' of play in this context ultimately means the production of economic capital, and in this way digital play is legitimised according to hegemonic capitalist values. Play is valued when it is used to prepare young people for their future lives as productive workers; when it is used as a form of work itself; and when it is used to help people remain healthy and well-functioning members of society. The chapter analyses these findings in light of the mobilising of very similar discourses by game industry groups, and argues that legitimising instrumental play should therefore be seen as a set of deliberate strategies to increase the value of gaming capital by making it relevant in other cultural fields such as health and education.

What emerges from the analysis in this chapter and the previous is that the legitimation of play in mainstream newspaper coverage is bound up with cultural understandings of productivity and pleasure. The supposed wastefulness of pleasurable play and the apparent productivity of instrumental play underpin the patterns of legitimation in newspaper coverage. For this reason, play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith's note that 'instrumentality' is based on the cultural dichotomy of work and play is important here:

> Play has its own instrumental behaviors, and its consequences are quite real and consequential to the players. The conventional concept of instrumentality is a highly narrow one usually confined to work schedules with clear-cut, externally imposed 'goal targets'. The historical and economic basis for this dualistic metaphor is quite insufficient to deal with the complex intentionalities of everyday life, including play life (Sutton-Smith 2001, p. 189).

The 'economic basis' of instrumentality is precisely what motivates the legitimation of education-, work-, and health-related uses of games in these newspapers, and so this 'narrow' cultural understanding of instrumentality is interrogated in the analysis that follows. However, privileging instrumentality over pleasure has important implications. Analysing instrumental uses of games through the lens of play theory, the chapter ends by arguing that there is a fundamental conflict between instrumentality and conceptions of play. This conflict means that play is only considered useful if it can be co-opted for other goals. The notion of play as pleasurable, creative, and free is elided, and so rather

than play being a way to resist social structures and institutions, it becomes a tool for their perpetuation.

Education and training: the legitimate play of youth

In the newspaper corpus, the most strongly legitimised use of digital games involves their use by young people for educational purposes. Many articles describe how digital games can be used to help young people learn or can be a tool for engagement in educational settings. Consistent with the emphasis currently placed on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education and developing children's programming skills (Dufva & Dufva 2016), several examples involve students learning how to code through the use of digital games:

- The *Toronto Star* (3 Dec 2013) reports on a public high school teacher who uses a variety of technologies in the classroom: 'he uses technology to keep his students engaged, from robotics to prototype development to computer and video-game programming.'
- The *Sydney Morning Herald* (22 Mar 2014) describes a public school whose students 'work in teams to program computer games using Kodu', a game creation tool used to learn about coding.
- A *New York Times* article (11 May 2014) about children learning how to code through the use of the game *Angry Birds* (Rovio Entertainment 2009) makes the importance of productive play overt: 'Parents love the idea of giving children something to do with computers that they see as productive, Mr. Pearce said. "We have any number of parents who say, 'I can't take my kid playing one more hour of video games,'" he said. But if the children are exploring coding, the parents tell him, "'I can live with that all night long.'"'
- A *New York Times* article (1 Jun 2014) about 'how to get girls into coding' quotes one educator who sees games as a pathway into programming: 'There are just so many girls who play *Minecraft* [Mojang 2011] who, as far as I'm concerned, are all people who can be swayed to pursue coding – they just don't realize it yet.'

Further examples highlight a variety of other educational outcomes, including helping with career paths and developing interpersonal skills:

- The *Vancouver Sun* (25 Jan 2014) reports on an online game designed to help young people make choices about their future careers: '"Admittedly, games don't sound serious, but games are a legitimate and credible option to solving real problems," reads a note on one slide. "We want to take the engagement youth feel when playing games, link that to (government of Canada) data so that youth can have a 'serious game' to use as a tool to make education and career choices"'.
- '*Lego Marvel* [Traveller's Tales 2013] has the added bonus of encouraging children to build, play and create with Lego in the real world, inspiring the next generation of engineers' (*Herald Sun*, 29 Dec 2013).
- The *Vancouver Sun* (1 May 2014) interviews a university professor about child bullying, and discusses 'a specially designed set of computer games' with the goal of getting players to engage in empathetic social interactions: 'With a computer game [children] can try to solve the problem in five or 10 different ways, to get closer and closer to a healthy solution to the problem' (*Vancouver Sun*, 1 May 2014).
- 'A new computer game that rewards children for upstanding behaviour is the latest tool to tackle bullying' (*Herald Sun*, 28 May 2014).
- 'Ernie and Bert help teach these children about their amazing bodies – inside and out – in this interactive video game' (*Toronto Star*, 3 Feb 2014).

These articles all serve to legitimise children's digital play by highlighting instrumental purposes that lead to favourable educational results. The above examples employ what Van Leeuwen calls 'means orientation' (2008, p. 114), a method of legitimation whereby an action is constructed as a means to an end. A subcategory of means orientation is 'potentiality' (Van Leeuwen 2008, p. 115), which is what these articles are concerned with. Digital play is legitimised because games have the potential to teach, engage, encourage, and reward. This is a notable difference in comparison to the

use of ‘effect orientation’ in articles discussing young people’s problematic play. As Chapter 3 discussed, effect orientation is used in newspaper coverage to construct digital play as inherently harmful to young people’s physical and mental health; that is, the inherent *effects* of digital play are presented as harmful. By contrast, the use of means orientation in the examples above construct digital play as something that can be *used* to achieve a desired goal. Importantly, the use of means orientation here does not negate the construction of digital play as inherently harmful. Rather, these discursive techniques of de/legitimation together construct digital play as a practice whose effects are harmful, but which can also be leveraged by parents or educators for beneficial purposes. These dual representations of digital play are on display in an article in *The Sun* about the Bafta Young Game Developers Programme, designed to encourage young people to join the game industry. Readers are told: ‘Don’t despair if your child is obsessed with video games—their hobby could become a career’ (*The Sun*, 22 May 2014). Addressing parents, the article assumes their state of despair at a child’s ‘obsession’ with digital games, a key factor in the delegitimation of play seen in Chapter 3. It is only by turning the child’s ‘obsession’ into a career that pleasurable play can be redeemed.

Another small but significant difference between the examples above and constructions of problematic play is the slightly greater level of agency given to young people in these articles about educational uses of games. Whereas constructions of problematic play deny young players any specific identity and agency over their actions by using genericised terms such as ‘children’ and only presenting a parental perspective, some of the articles about educational uses specify individual young people and allow them a voice via quotes. For example: ‘James, 8, explained that programming is “getting the computer to do something by itself.” It is fun, he said’ (*New York Times*, 11 May 2014). In this way, young people’s voices are used to legitimise their own interest in instrumental play. However, for the most part, young people are still represented as genericised categories such as ‘children’ or ‘kids’, and the specified individuals are mainly adults responsible for directing their play. Sometimes young people are presented as being oblivious to the positive outcomes of game play, as with the girls who ‘don’t realize’ that *Minecraft* can steer them into coding. Digital play is constructed as a kind of Trojan horse here, allowing adults to reappropriate, manage,

and direct young people's pleasurable play, turning it towards apparently more valuable and legitimised educational ends. How young people themselves feel about playing is, with the rare exception, not deemed relevant except insofar as they feel sufficiently 'engaged' to fulfil these purposes.

What these constructions of play reveal is that, in mainstream discourse, fun for fun's sake is rarely enough to justify children's digital play; instead there must be some extrinsic, additional benefit in order for play to be legitimised. In the examples above, the primary benefit is preparing young people for their futures as successful, productive, working adults. This is the element of moral judgment which Van Leeuwen (2008) deems necessary for the discursive legitimation of social practices. These articles mobilise discourses of childhood as a time when children must be directed by adults to become productive members of society (Burman 2008; Smith 2015), and position games as a form of playful technology capable of assisting in this goal. Sutton-Smith (2001), in his breakdown of the rhetorics of play theories, notes that 'play as progression' is a very common understanding of its purpose in Western societies, though he argues that the relevance of this rhetoric 'has been more assumed than demonstrated' (p. 9). Further, he writes:

> Most educators over the past two hundred years seem to have so needed to represent playful imitation as a form of children's socialization and moral, social, and cognitive growth that they have seen play as being primarily about development rather than enjoyment (Sutton-Smith 2001, pp. 9-10).

In these newspaper articles about educational uses of digital play, the primary benefit is the role games can play in developing young people's skills and career prospects. The widespread belief in play as progress supports the legitimation of digital play in educational settings, where enjoyment is a tool used for other purposes.

Games as work

A parallel instrumental discourse regarding employment and careers is also used to legitimise the play of adults, such as when newspapers report on jobs or careers

involving games. The increase in job opportunities resulting from the growth of the game industry over the past few decades is reflected in stories reporting on usually young and aspiring game developers. In conjunction with the educational uses of games discussed above, newspaper coverage of this sort thus presents a pathway from children's digital play through to a productive working life in a growing industry. In addition, there is positive coverage of game play streaming and video creation, practices that have emerged in recent years on the YouTube and Twitch.tv platforms in particular. Precarious as this work is[15], it is another kind of economically productive engagement with games, and is given extra legitimacy by being couched in a discourse of entrepreneurialism:

- *The Sun* (6 Mar 2014) reports on a 23-year-old man who is 'set to become a millionaire' from uploading *Minecraft* videos to his YouTube channel. Based on total video views, the article describes him as 'more popular than Justin Bieber and One Direction'.
- A *Los Angeles Times* article (25 May 2014) about the Twitch.tv streaming website describes a 23-year-old man who makes a living by streaming his game play. His play is legitimised by his ability to make money from it and is presented very positively as an entrepreneurial opportunity brought about by Twitch.tv's success.
- *The Sun* (20 Mar 2014) highlights game development jobs in an article about a creative industries event, noting that 'the video games industry pumps over £2 billion into the UK economy each year, outstripping the entire UK music market.'

[15] Because streamers and video producers often begin with a very small audience, Kuehn and Corrigan's (2013) concept of 'hope labor' is an accurate way to describe the work required to—hopefully—earn a living in this way while producing content for platform owners (e.g. YouTube and Twitch). Postigo's (2009) related concept 'passionate labor' describes creative work often performed on a volunteer basis. Regarding digital games specifically, the term 'playbour' has gained some currency, originally coined by Kücklich (2005) in the context of game modding. In addition, Bulut (2015) discusses how precarious work in the game industry, such as QA tester work, is often justified as a means to attain more 'glamourous' development work—another example of 'hope labor'.

- The *Sydney Morning Herald* (29 Mar 2014) profiles an iPhone app developer who 'has been hooked on computer games since the days of Zelda'. His interest in computers and games has led to his 'awesome' job working on a mobile game. Much like *The Sun* article above which advised parents to not 'despair' if their child is 'obsessed' with games, this developer's story is presented as productivity redeeming pleasure: 'He had always been interested in computers but as a youngster he didn't consider that it was possible to do anything "productive" with his hobby' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 Mar 2014).

There is a gendered dimension to this kind of play-as-work. Analysis in Chapter 3 noted that representations of women's recreational game play often involve self-effacement or embarrassment, but this is not the case in representations of play for instrumental purposes. For example, a 31-year-old woman in the *New York Times* (2 Feb 2014) is described as sitting in a darkened room engaged in a *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013) 'marathon', which sounds like a stereotypical negative portrayal of a gamer. But instead her play is presented positively because she uploads videos of her play to YouTube and earns a significant amount of money from them. A *Toronto Star* article (3 Jan 2014) about women game designers presents their interest in games as entirely positive because they are forging a career in the traditionally male-dominated field. The instrumental purposes and outcomes of digital play in these examples legitimises these women's play without the caveats that tend to appear with pleasurable play; for instance, there is certainly no suggestion that earning money from a *Grand Theft Auto V* marathon is embarrassing. Chess (2010) finds similar gender differences regarding the purpose of play in her study of game advertising aimed at adult women. This advertising 'emphasizes productivity over play' (Chess 2010, p. 230) and especially focuses on self-help applications like health and fitness. Fortunati (2015) also notes this gender difference in relation to play, arguing that men in late modernity enjoy a right to play that women cannot attain as easily. Fortunati (2015, p. 300) calls the playful male an 'ir-responsible' (but legitimate) social identity, which emerged alongside the responsible worker identity. Men are able to play in their legitimate leisure time as long as they are responsible and productive workers at other times. But for women, as the examples above and Chess's (2010) study suggest, play itself needs to be productive in order to be legitimate.

This gender difference in the context of productivity and legitimised play can be further demonstrated by contrasting the examples above with the representations of sportsmen analysed in Chapter 3. For the most part sportsmen's pleasurable play is presented as legitimate, but this legitimacy is premised on the players' status as successful, well-known sport stars. Within the sample there are two examples in which sportsmen experience professional failure by losing matches—the English football team (*The Sun*, 26 Jun 2014) and Polish tennis player Jerzy Janowicz (*New York Times*, 26 Jun 2014)—and as a result their digital play becomes trivialised and even partly to blame for their failure. *The Sun* implies the English team was too interested in their game consoles to put in a strong on-field performance, while the *New York Times* suggests Janowicz is immature for discussing 'his favorite video game' after losing a match. As young men, these sport stars are legitimised and normalised game-playing subjects, but even for them the legitimacy of their play is contingent on professional success—or, in other words, on productivity. Without that form of success and productivity, their digital play is re-cast as wasteful, immature, and trivial. However, a major difference between representations of sportsmen and more marginalised player identities is that sportsmen are still commonly represented playing games for pleasure without caveats. When women players are represented, on the other hand, legitimacy comes from the productivity of play itself.

Marginalised player identities—especially women and the elderly—become more prominent in these instances of digital play performed for instrumental purposes beyond entertainment, which further reinforces the dominance of the young male player as the privileged subject of pleasurable play. Iversen (2016) explored the connection between instrumental uses of games and different types of player identities in her analysis of how ageing adults are constructed in academic games research:

> [T]he focus is foremost on the potential beneficiality of playing while elements otherwise often associated with playing games such as pleasure, fun, relaxation, or finding ways of tackling existence are often wholly lacking or treated as a means to a greater and more important end (Iversen 2016, p. 14).

Iversen (2016, p. 15) notes that 'a utilitarian approach is nearly inescapable in relation to particular digital game users'. Further, she argues that the focus on instrumental uses of games by ageing adults is bound up with the notion of economic productivity. If ageing adults who have retired from work are less economically productive, it seems to be less acceptable for them to indulge in a supposedly unproductive activity like pleasurable play. Instead, ageing adults are encouraged 'to prove their societal worth by playing mainly to obtain other ends, namely those of health maintenance' (Iversen 2016, p. 20). This connection of instrumental play with the economic productivity of players also motivates the interest in educational uses of games for children—children being another 'unproductive' age-defined category whose pleasurable play is often deemed problematic. This present research affirms these findings that social actors who are thought to be less economically productive than Fortunati's 'ir-responsible' man, such as the elderly and children, struggle to achieve a social license to play. This is further demonstrated in some examples from the newspapers, in which welfare recipients and children are subject to moral judgments regarding their play:

- *The Sun* (30 Dec 2013) reports on a 'jobless mum' who is 'demanding a new council home' because the previous resident of her flat died in it. She receives £13,000 a year in benefits, and the article, via quotes from neighbours, labels her a 'freeloader'. As evidence it offers a few of her belongings as signifiers of leisure: 'two flat-screen TVs plus PlayStation 3 and Nintendo Wii games consoles … a leather sofabed and a designer toaster'. The implication that she has spent, or wasted, her welfare money on these things suggests that she has not earned a right to leisure.
- In a very similar example, *The Sun* (22 Dec 2013) expresses disbelief at the extravagance of another 'jobless mum' and her 'unemployed hubby' who, due to welfare changes, can no longer afford to spend £2,500 on Christmas presents for their ten children. These presents, we are told, typically include 'computer games' for the 'THREE Xbox consoles in the home – one of which is connected to a huge flatscreen TV'.
- A *New York Times* column (11 May 2014) describes a schoolboy with a history of behavioural problems and quotes the school principal explaining why he cannot be suspended: '"Sending him home is like giving him a vacation," the

principal said. “He’ll spend the day playing video games.”’ This boy’s unsatisfactory progress at school denies him the right to play.

In these examples digital games and play are invoked as symbols of wastefulness. Digital play is not a legitimate activity for these people, who are represented as unproductive. In Western capitalist societies productivity is most ably demonstrated through paid work, and so a tension is evident here between this imperative and the perceived wastefulness of play. One way to resolve this tension is to conflate work and play, as with the Twitch streamer and YouTubers above, whose work involves play.

Games for health

A final and somewhat more contested kind of instrumental play dominant in the data set involves the use of games to achieve health benefits. The analysis of young people’s problematic play in Chapter 3 noted that a fear of digital play leading to health problems is particularly common in the newspapers. In some other articles, however, digital games are presented as a potential way to positively address weight-related health issues. Not surprisingly, the examples below involve the use of ‘active’ games, such as those played on the Nintendo Wii, a console whose marketing often emphasised player movement:

- Both the *Daily Mail* (7 Jun 2014) and *The Sun* (6 Jun 2014) report a story involving an 11-year-old boy with severe weight problems, who uses a Nintendo Wii as part of his efforts to lose weight. However, the *Daily Mail* article is noncommittal about its effectiveness, while *The Sun* article contains an air of scepticism, presenting the boy’s physical activity as a claim of his parents rather than fact: ‘They maintain he is on a strict diet – and that he keeps active with regular sessions on his Nintendo Wii computer game’ (*The Sun*, 6 Jun 2014).
- A *Vancouver Sun* article (27 Dec 2013) reports on a smartphone game developed by researchers ‘to get youngsters moving’ and address problems with obesity. While very positive overall, the article displays the ambivalent feelings

seen throughout these newspapers regarding this kind of technology: 'Smartphones and computers are part of the problem by encouraging so much screen time. But the researchers say the gadgets can also be part of the solution'.

The ambivalence in the examples above points to contestation around the use of games for health improvements, especially in regard to children and obesity. There are occasional suggestions that games may be useful for weight loss, but it is more common for newspapers to express the concerns seen in Chapter 3 about screen time leading to various health problems in young people, including obesity. Weight problems among young people is certainly the most contested area involving the use of games for health benefits in these newspapers. For other social actors, such as those below, the use of games to achieve positive health benefits is presented more assuredly:

- In a Christmas buying guide, the *Herald Sun* (15 Dec 2013) suggests that 'an intense Wii Fit U … workout could be what you need to stay in shape'. The use of 'you' directly addresses adult readers of the *Herald Sun* who may be concerned about their weight and fitness.
- The *Daily Mail* (4 Feb 2014) reports that 'playing video games could help new mothers get back to their pre-pregnancy weight, according to a study'. The article presents the information positively, adding expert authority by naming the publication journal and quoting the lead researcher.

A number of other health benefits are presented very optimistically, as in the following examples in which elderly players feature prominently:

- The *Daily Mail* (15 Mar 2014) and *Herald Sun* (17 Mar 2014) report on a study that explored the use of Wii balance board games by the elderly in treatment to prevent falls. As with the article about new mothers losing weight with Wii games, the *Daily Mail* quotes the lead researcher and mentions the journal of publication.
- The *Herald Sun* (18 Mar 2014; 19 Mar 2014) covers the development of a virtual world designed to improve the lives of people with dementia. One of the

game's developers is quoted stressing the importance of achieving health benefits, not simply providing entertainment: 'What we want to be able to do with Alzheimer's Australia, in the long term, is have tangible research outcomes, rather than just a video game' (*Herald Sun*, 19 Mar 2014).

- Further examples include using the game *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1984) to help people with post-traumatic stress disorder (*Daily Mail*, 1 Apr 2014), using a custom-designed game to improve cognition in older adults (*Toronto Star*, 7 Dec 2013), and using social games to encourage healthy lifestyles (*Vancouver Sun*, 7 Dec 2013).

In these examples, means orientation is again employed to highlight how digital play can be a means to a positive end. Rather than health benefits being a fortunate side effect of pleasurable play, games are instead used very deliberately to achieve legitimised goals. Some of these articles engage with common representations of games as 'just' fun entertainment products before then describing the health benefits, such as 'Video games are not just for fun' (*Herald Sun*, 19 Mar 2014) and 'You might think of your health as serious business, but…' (*Vancouver Sun*, 7 Dec 2013), indicating that this shift in discourse regarding positive health outcomes of digital play is nascent and ambiguous.

The contrasting use of means orientation and effect orientation in newspaper representations of digital play constructs the practice in ways that complicate its perceived legitimacy. While the deliberate use of games as a means to an end legitimises play in the examples outlined above, this is still not to say that digital play *in general* is legitimised by these instrumental uses. As Chapter 3 noted, concerns about children's play in particular are expressed using effect orientation, meaning that digital play is constructed as inherently harmful or dangerous. Instrumental play, on the other hand, is presented as a way for people—usually adults who are either players themselves or managers of children's play—to turn game play to productive ends. Notably, a number of these articles present the instrumental use of games as a surprising reveal, as though readers would usually perceive digital play as trivial or wasteful. For example, the article about the YouTube user playing *Grand Theft Auto V* states that 'the

video game marathon is not a diversion—it is her job' (*New York Times*, 2 Feb 2014). Another article about game design students gathering to play together is similar: 'They aren't procrastinating. They're doing their homework' (*New York Times*, 1 Jun 2014). These examples resonate with an example of children's play mentioned earlier which likewise assumes wasteful play but then reconciles it with a productive outcome: 'Don't despair if your child is obsessed with video games—their hobby could become a career' (*The Sun*, 22 May 2014). Digital play clearly still carries a sense of wastefulness in newspaper coverage even as these instrumental purposes are highlighted. Indeed, these stories are considered newsworthy in large part because the productivity of play is considered somewhat unusual in comparison to a long history of media coverage that has cast digital play in a negative light. In this way, instrumental play is constructed as a redemption, a repurposing of a practice that otherwise struggles to achieve legitimacy in these same publications. The legitimation of digital play that results from establishing its relevance to education, health, and work is analysed in more detail in the next section, which considers how these instrumental uses of games increase the value of gaming capital.

Play, productivity, and the value of gaming capital

The instrumental uses of games that attract coverage in newspapers legitimise digital play by establishing its relevance to valued social practices and institutions. Moreover, examples of instrumental play operate as counter-discourses to negative perceptions of games and play that are expressed within these same publications. The anxieties about play analysed in Chapter 3 are almost directly countered by the instrumental uses outlined above, and in this way pleasurable and instrumental play exist in a state of tension. Children are presented as being overly 'obsessed' with games, but games are also presented as a useful educational tool to prepare children for adulthood. There are fears that excessive digital play leads to physical and mental health issues, but play is also presented as a way to improve players' health. Anxieties around the time spent on 'addictive' games, especially in regard to children and women players, disappear once an instrumental purpose is established, such as earning money from game play or forging a career making games.

Together these instrumental uses of games show just how important productivity is to the mainstream discursive legitimation of digital play. By demonstrating the relevance of digital play to education, health, and work, these strategies of legitimation increase the value of gaming capital. If knowing how to play, make, and use games becomes more relevant to other cultural fields, these knowledges hold more value. Bearing in mind Bourdieu's insistence that 'economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital' (2006, p. 113), the value of gaming capital is further increased if can be readily converted into other forms. Many individuals, companies, and organisations in possession of gaming capital therefore have an interest in increasing its relevance elsewhere. For example, if games are used to teach coding with an eye towards future job opportunities, the value of gaming capital is increased via its ability to help young people become productive workers. People who make money from gaming YouTube videos or Twitch streams have managed to convert their gaming capital into economic capital in a very direct way. Using games to improve people's health is also, as Iversen (2016) has pointed out in relation to elderly players, tied to the notion of economic productivity. For developers and publishers, market opportunities are increased by these instrumental uses. In all these ways, the economic productivity of gaming is established and this legitimises the practice according to the value systems operating within these publications. The newspaper coverage of instrumental play is motivated by an interest in these virtuous uses for play that position the practice as valuable according to the logic of the prevailing field of power, wherein economic power is primary. Rather than remaining a cloistered field with values unique to it, gaming is shown to fit in with wider cultural values rather than being a threat to them.

Given that instrumental uses of games legitimise play in these ways, it is not surprising that industry groups have mobilised these counter-discourses. The website of the US-based Entertainment Software Association is particularly revealing in this regard. Until recently[16], the website offered a downloadable media resource kit containing fact sheets

[16] These separate fact sheets no longer appear in the media resource kit, but on the website's 'overview' page the ESA prominently touts its partnerships with organisations and events which 'advance

with information on how digital games are 'improving' various fields. The fact sheets explain how games are 'improving' education, health, social issues, the workplace, the economy, and art: games help students improve their grades; they help with workplace training and recruitment; they help people keep fit and recover from injuries. These fact sheets are direct responses to common perceptions of games, namely that they are wasteful, trivial, harmful, and have little social value. The information on educational uses of games responds to concerns about games harming children's school work; the health benefits of (active) games respond to fears about sedentary play and obesity rates; the workplace uses challenge the traditional separation of work and play and the privileging of the former over the latter. Another fact sheet explains how families play games together, responding to stereotypes of lonely gamers and harmful games. With these media resources, the ESA attempts to shift the discourse away from negative perceptions and towards a focus on the instrumental uses of games beyond just their entertainment value.

The ongoing series of *Digital Australia* reports, which explores and tracks game-playing habits of Australian households, likewise demonstrates the discursive importance of instrumentality to valuing play in game industry public relations activity. The *Digital Australia 2016* report (Brand & Todhunter 2015), produced by Bond University researchers in collaboration with the Australian Interactive Games and Entertainment Association (IGEA), begins by recapping previous findings in the series and suggests that over the past few years digital games have matured and become mainstream, based on the numbers of people who play them. After this, the next development—and the focus of the 2016 report—is games for 'productive' purposes, which the report identifies as health, education, and training, the same instrumental uses highlighted in newspaper coverage. These instrumental uses are presented as part of this maturation narrative. By the time of the 2018 report, this narrative is seemingly complete according to the introduction on the IGEA website:

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entertainment software's positive impact on areas of daily life such as education, health and the workplace' (Entertainment Software Association 2019), the same instrumental uses identified in this chapter.

> It's official; video games are a mature medium used for entertainment and non-entertainment alike. Not only are games a global and diverse medium enjoyed by billions of the world's citizens, they are the products of thousands of high-value and advanced businesses with their highly educated workforces. Games have their own academic and professional disciplines, they feature a huge range of topics, stories, designs and play experiences designed to entertain, inform, persuade, educate, test and train (Interactive Games and Entertainment Association 2018).

The report itself ties the 'progress' of the medium to instrumental purposes beyond their ability to entertain: 'Their purpose is mainly to entertain and engage. Their progress is to inform and persuade, to educate and illuminate. They are used in schools and workplaces, in hospitals and parks' (Brand, Todhunter & Jervis 2017, p. 3). The positioning of games in this report is thus very similar to what is found in the newspaper data: games are entertaining, but they are most strongly legitimised when gaming capital can be put to use for instrumental benefits according to wider cultural values. These *Digital Australia* reports consider instrumentality to be both an outcome and indication of the maturation of the medium, but do not question the cultural and political milieu that produces and values digital games as useful objects, and play as primarily an instrumentally valuable practice. In order to avoid uncritical assumptions about what is and is not 'productive', the legitimation of digital play as instrumentally useful instead needs to be critiqued in terms of cultural values that elevate specific forms of productivity. The education of children, the health of the population, and the generation of income through work are all ultimately tied to the importance of economic productivity that underpins capitalist societies. The privileging of instrumental play, therefore, must be seen as a set of deliberate strategies to legitimise games and play by establishing gaming's value to the hegemonic field of power, at the expense of valuing play for its own pleasure.

While these strategies work to increase the value of gaming capital, it is important to note that instrumental justifications do not necessarily succeed in neutralising the devaluing of play seen in Chapter 3, even if they operate as counter-discourses. This is evident given that the legitimation of play on instrumental grounds is not entirely new; in fact, some of these justifications stretch back decades. For example, Newman (2017) has described how the ambivalent media coverage of home game consoles and

computers in the 1970s and early 1980s included the notion that they could be potentially productive forms of leisure, such as encouraging children's programming skills. Indeed, Newman (2017, p. 179) sees 'ambivalence about technology as the prevailing discourse of video games' at this time. McKernan's (2013) analysis of game coverage in the *New York Times* from 1980 to 2010 found that the newspaper presented digital games as primarily threatening, but a 'counternarrative' during the 1980s and 90s highlighted the 'functional benefits' of games, including educational benefits and the development of practical skills, such as improved hand-eye coordination. However, McKernan finds that in the 2000s this counternarrative shifted from these instrumental benefits to exploring games' 'transcendental value', meaning their artistic merit. Williams (2003), in a study of digital game coverage in US news magazines from 1970 to 2000, similarly describes instrumental uses of games as 'reactive counter-measures' (p. 537) to negative portrayals. The instrumental uses in Williams's study include the improvement of physical skills (again, hand-eye coordination), educational uses, and improved 'technoliteracy'. Williams suggests that games became more widely accepted and 'mature' by the late 1990s, and coverage was 'now less focused on defending video games rather than on simply accepting their presence and enjoying or disliking them as readily as other mainstream media' (2003, p. 543).

However, this chapter's analysis of instrumental legitimations of game play explores a wider array of data sources across a different time period, and its findings are somewhat different from McKernan (2013) and Williams (2003). Whereas McKernan (2013) suggests that the transcendental/artistic construction of games is a shift away from coverage of their instrumental value, the analysis above has shown that instrumental uses of games continue to attract significant coverage in mainstream newspapers, and that instrumentality is a key element in the discursive legitimation of digital play. This is particularly the case for children, whose play is often deemed problematic, and for women and the elderly who are less commonly identified as game players in these publications. While Williams (2003) suggests that by the late 1990s digital games had become accepted and 'mainstream', this should not be taken to mean that issues of problematic play have been resolved. This chapter's analysis shows that the process of digital play's legitimation is ongoing, and the promotion of instrumental uses is an important strategy employed in that process. The case of 'games for health' shows that

as public anxieties shift to new issues, digital games may be cast as either villain or saviour or both. The interest in the health benefits of game play outlined above seems to be a more recent development, having emerged especially from the popularisation of 'active' games with the Nintendo Wii in the mid- to late-2000s, and also as a response to growing fears about childhood obesity around this time. However, these health benefits are also discussed somewhat tentatively in regard to children's play. The key point here is that instrumental legitimations should not be seen as straightforward and successful counters to the devaluing of digital play. Instead the situation is much more complex and the site of ongoing discursive contestation. In addition, the tensions between wastefulness and productivity continue to structure responses to digital play in ways that cannot be simply resolved by pointing to 'productive' uses of games in specific contexts such as education. In other words, instrumental and pleasurable play are legitimised or delegitimised in distinct and complex ways in mainstream discourse. To further analyse these patterns of de/legitimation, the following section places digital play into the broader context of modern play practices, and argues that the privileging of instrumental uses leads to the co-option of play for institutionalised goals.

The harnessing of play

Digital games are increasingly pervasive, as industry groups are keen to emphasise. However, as is clear from the analysis above, it is instrumental uses beyond the act of play itself that form the foundation of digital play's mainstream discursive legitimation. To better understand this instrumental valuing of play, this section considers the characteristics of play activities in the context of modern Western societies. Play scholar Thomas Henricks (2006), using the work of Max Weber who outlined how Western societies have undergone a process of rationalisation, points out that characteristics of play have likewise changed in modern rationalistic societies. For instance, Henricks argues that 'modern play tends to be organized instrumentally' (p. 94) in that it serves institutional interests and relies on institutional support. Further, it 'tends to occur in institutionalized games' (p. 96), and it 'tends to be bureaucratically organized' (p. 98). Broadly, in modernity play has become more controlled and managed than it was in earlier eras. While elements of individual creativity and freedom are still important to

conceptualisations of play, it tends to take place within institutional frameworks and can thus be monitored and managed. Henricks points to modern sport as an example of this trend (2006, pp. 92-100). Professional sport is one of the most valued forms of modern play, and is also one of the most organised, controlled, restrictive, in short bureaucratic forms. It also has clear instrumental uses: it often generates vast amounts of money for individuals and organisations, it is work for the athletes and officials rather than leisurely play, and it performs the valuable social function of establishing 'heroes' and role-models. Amateur and youth sports are also highly managed, and have their own instrumental value, not least in their health benefits.

This broad view of changes in the characteristics of play in late modernity is useful in analysing the legitimation of instrumental digital play. According to the characteristics of modern play outlined by Henricks (2006), digital game play in general could be described as thoroughly modern in that it is highly controlled in comparison to more 'wild' and freeform play which might rely on participants' imaginations, such as 'phantasmagorical' play (Sutton-Smith 2001, pp. 151-172). Digital play is also instrumental in a number of ways, even when the primary motivation is pleasure rather than the more obvious instrumental uses described above. For example, the production and consumption of games is driven largely by companies looking to profit from play, and this economic productivity is key to their value. Further, digital play is often a form of relaxation to prepare for the next busy work day, and in that way it supports the structure of capitalist working life. Digital play can also serve the family institution by offering a common interest or by keeping children occupied, as some examples of children's play in Chapter 3 showed. Henricks (2010) suggests that digital games are well suited to a postmodern culture in which a 'player' is frequently a user or consumer of cultural goods. To the extent that people today pick and choose from an array of entertainment experiences to suit their desires, 'an instrumental ethic prevails' (Henricks 2010, p. 27). For Henricks, the postmodern 'consuming player' identity involves 'a process of making selections from among these [cultural] goods, arranging those choices in self-styled ways, and then dubbing the whole affair "creativity"' (2010, p. 29). In this way digital play is a highly controlled and rigid kind of play experience, relying on cultural producers (game developers and publishers) to provide the context, rules, and materials for play. It is hardly surprising that digital play embodies these

characteristics of control and instrumentality given that digital games have emerged in only the past fifty to sixty years, born into rationalistic, bureaucratic societies.

Given the instrumental and bureaucratic organisation of modern play and modern life, it is also not surprising that digital play would be most valued when its benefits to important social institutions are emphasised. In the examples detailed in this chapter, digital play is used for education, for work, and for health, and is legitimised by the benefits it brings in these areas. With individuals encouraged to think rationally about their lives and consider the best course of action—including in work, in study, and in health—digital play that contributes in some way to personal progress can be aligned with predominant social values. Molesworth and Watkins (2016) explored this issue of personal progress in interviews with digital game players. These researchers found that players do indeed use games to experience feelings of progress in various ways. Digital games can represent technological progress, which gives a sense of continual improvement, and players may use games to experience feelings of achievement that they lack in other areas of life. Notably, despite common claims that digital play is a waste of time, Molesworth and Watkins suggest that people often play digital games to *avoid* a sense of wasted time. If players feel unsatisfied in their work or family lives, leisure experiences like digital play can offer them a sense of achievement and progress. Molesworth and Watkins (2016) call this 'a curious manifestation of a work ethic' (p. 525) and note that, because these feelings of progress satisfy cultural expectations of adulthood, players are able 'to overcome discourses of play as childish and reconcile videogame play with "normal" adult behavior' (p. 524). Thornham's (2009) ethnographic research similarly finds that game players feel a need to justify their play 'as something other than pleasure, escapism or entertainment' (p. 142). These studies of players reinforce the broader point that digital play is most valued when it can be shown to be instrumental and satisfy modern ideologies of productivity, progress, and improvement, thus providing 'alibis for play' (Deterding 2018).

The valuing of instrumentality has important implications for discursive constructions of digital play, as well as what games can be justifiably used for. As Iversen (2016)

notes, instrumental justifications tend to sideline the pleasurable aspects of the activity[17]. If legitimate digital play is instrumental, the question of how pleasurable play is valued remains unsettled. It is not that pleasure is not permitted in these discourses of legitimation; rather the pleasure of play is appropriated for instrumental purposes. Pleasure is put to use, or as Henricks phrases it 'play is put to work' (2006, p. 96). The clearest example of this utilisation of play for productive ends is 'gamification', which is also perhaps the clearest example of the legitimised use of games in other cultural fields. Gamification has been defined as 'using game design elements in non-game contexts' (Deterding 2014, p. 305). Often taking the form of 'points' and 'achievements' that add a game-like layer to non-game practices, gamification is used to motivate participants to meet their goals. These techniques have been implemented by businesses to keep customers 'engaged' in their products and employees focused on their work. For instance, Zichermann and Linder's (2013) *The Gamification Revolution* aims to inform business leaders how they can use gamification techniques to improve the performance of their employees and keep their customers engaged. Dragona (2014) outlines how gamification practices have been implemented by social media companies to encourage the extraction of users' data for profit. The 'productive' use of games and game-like systems in these contexts refers to the economic productivity of the companies.

Gamification is a prime example of games being used in legitimised, instrumental ways in other cultural fields such as education and in various industries. But this valorisation has consequences for the role of play in modern societies precisely because instrumentality runs counter to many theories of play. For Henricks, one of the characteristics of play is its 'consummatory' nature, meaning the focus of an activity is on the means rather than the ends (Henricks 2006, pp. 188-192; 2015, pp. 43-4)[18]. In

[17] As well as the discursive sidelining of pleasure, experiments by Etkin (2016) found that participants who tracked and measured enjoyable activities like walking and reading found the activities less pleasurable. Etkin argues that 'measurement makes such activities seem more like work, which undermines intrinsic motivation' (2016, p. 14).

[18] Henricks (2015, pp. 42-67) reviews definitions of play from numerous scholars and ultimately reaches his own list of characteristics, including that play is consummatory, unpredictable, self-regulated, and

this he concurs with a number of classic theories of play, including those of Huizinga (1955) and Caillois (2001), who stress the 'apartness' of play from other aspects of everyday life. This does not deny any instrumental outcomes to play, but it means 'playfulness' involves being in the moment and being motivated by the play activity itself; any external outcomes are a secondary concern. More recent definitions of play retain this aspect. Wood (2009, p. 167) writes that play involves intrinsic motivation, and Eberle (2014, p. 231) argues that play is 'driven by pleasure'. Gordon (2009, p. 11) likewise highlights this conflict between play and instrumentality, arguing that 'an activity stops being play when it is driven by goals and inhibited by the fear of real life consequences'. Additionally, play is frequently described as voluntary (Eberle 2014; Gordon 2009), which again is consistent with the theories of Huizinga and Caillois, who both describe play as 'free', meaning 'not obligatory' (Caillois 2001, p. 9).

It is difficult to describe as 'play' an activity that is merely a means to some desired goal, or an activity that someone is required to participate in. Yet this is often what gamification involves. It is driven by desired outcomes, measurements, improvements, and progress, not the pleasure or satisfaction of play itself or the creative capacities of players. In a workplace or classroom setting, in which certain activities and standards of performance are required, it is also hard to see that gamified activities could be truly voluntary. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that individuals can bring a playful approach to any number of activities. It is certainly possible to be playful while working or studying. Sicart (2014) argues that play is 'a way of being in the world', and he therefore differs from the likes of Huizinga and Henricks by not opposing play 'to reality, to work, to ritual or sports because it exists in all of them' (Sicart 2014, p. 3). Henricks (2015) does allow for this, however, when he describes combinations such as 'playful work' and 'worklike play'. Combinations like these are also the basis of Csikszentmihalyi's (1977) concept of flow, according to which people engaged in activities as diverse as rock climbing, surgery, and artistic creation can enter a 'flow state' between boredom and anxiety, in which they are focused entirely on the task at

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involves feelings of fun, exhilaration, and gratification. He uses these characteristics to contrast play with work, ritual, and communitas, describing all of these as 'patterns of expression'.

hand. Outcomes are temporarily a distant concern, and so even activities usually not thought of as play can become inherently motivating and thus play-like. However, the fact remains that using games for education, health, and training is primarily about the end result, with the means subordinated to these ends. Play is only considered useful if it can be harnessed, a conceptualisation that sits very awkwardly with theories that insist upon the free and creative nature of play. As Henricks (2015, p. 49) notes, 'play events commonly function as rebellions or resistances against the wider world of officially recognized organizations, proprieties, and regimens'. The kind of play involved in gamification's project of leveraging play for institutional goals is at best an impoverished form aimed at controlling users' creative expression rather than fostering it.

An especially notable example of gamification-style techniques is an initiative by the Chinese government, in collaboration with major online and social media companies, to assign Chinese citizens a 'social credit' score (Hatton 2015). Due to become mandatory in 2020, the system tracks users' activities and awards (or subtracts) points for buying certain products, paying bills, and generally behaving in approved ways. For achieving a high score, users are rewarded with various benefits—such as less paperwork for visa applications, faster hotel checkouts, and greater prominence on matchmaking websites—and are encouraged to show off their score to others. This 'gamification of trust' (Ramadan 2018) could not be further from play as rebellion or resistance. To Western eyes the government's role in the social credit scheme may make it seem especially nefarious, but it is not drastically different from corporate loyalty reward schemes so common in Western countries. Whether run by public or private entities, these systems aim to control people's behaviour, turning everyday choices into a kind of game with the goal of increasing a score.

Among scholars there has been some pushback to the valorising of gamification, essentially because its proponents have tended to co-opt play for the perpetuation of unjust social systems. For example, deWinter, Kocurek and Nichols (2014) have dubbed gamification 'Taylorism 2.0' for the way it is used to leverage the 'fun' of games to organise, manage, and surveil workers. The bluntest of these critiques is game scholar Ian Bogost's argument that 'gamification is bullshit' (Bogost 2011, 2014).

Bogost means this in the sense that gamification, as it is often deployed, is ‘a perversion of games’ in the service of coercive or deceptive ends. It is not so much the use of games for instrumental purposes that Bogost objects to, since using a game to teach something ‘isn’t really gamification at all, it’s just a game’ (2014, p. 68). The focus of the criticism is the rhetoric of gamification’s evangelists, and the cracks this rhetoric papers over. For instance, if a workplace is gamified by the addition of ‘points’ and ‘rewards’ designed to motivate employees, the conditions that led to their demotivation in the first place are ignored or even deliberately obscured. At its worst, gamification is the practice of making oppressive systems tolerable. This may be a problem in educational contexts especially, with the risk that students are motivated only by the game-like constructs rather than the subject of study or the process of learning. A number of scholars have argued that gamification needs to be reclaimed from those who perpetuate exploitative systems, and instead turned towards subversion and resistance (Dragona 2014; Fuchs 2018; Woodcock & Johnson 2017). However, at present it appears that gamification is used more in line with Schrape’s (2014) more pessimistic view, which argues that gamification’s regulation of user behaviour is part of a new governmentality of control through positive feedback.

In critiques of gamification, digital games are presented as a creative and expressive medium, while gamification is a ‘perversion’ (Bogost 2011). The creativity of players and developers is sidelined, replaced by the logic of metrics, points, and ‘engagement’. These critiques find support in theories of play. In his explication of play forms, Caillois (2001, pp. 43-55) argues that play is ‘corrupted’ when its conventions are rejected, including the notion that the play world is separate from ‘reality’. Play, he argues, is ‘contaminated’ when the real world enters the play world, when the structures and conventions of play are not maintained. This conception of play as separate from the rest of life has been challenged by a number of digital game scholars (Consalvo 2009; Malaby 2007; Taylor 2012, 2018). For example, Taylor (2018) explores the practices of game streamers whose play is a form of work, such as those that appear in examples in this chapter, and argues that the strict conceptual separation of work and play is inadequate for explaining the meaning and value these streamers place on their play. Taylor argues that Caillois and other early play scholars are too dichotomous in their views of play. But while describing play’s characteristics is notoriously difficult, it is

also vitally important to maintain distinctions between play, work, and other forms of expression, because this allows us to distinguish between activities that are truly playful and those that merely imitate play. These distinctions are important if play is to be thought of as a form of human activity and expression with its own benefits, rather than merely a tool for increased 'productivity'. Taylor's (2018) focus on individual player experiences is important because it reminds us that players can carve out playful spaces for themselves even as they perform work, but it is also the case that these players necessarily operate within social, cultural, and political structures which must also be accounted for. In contrast to Taylor, and inspired by Marx and Huizinga, Roberts (2018) persuasively argues that work and play should remain conceptually separated in the interest of freedom from unending labour. As Kristensen and Wilhelmsson (2017, p. 393) argue, if play is not understood as distinct from work, 'play/game can be anything and everything, since there is no ending to the game'. An example of the problems that can arise from conflating work and play is provided by Brock's (2017) critique of esports, in which he suggests that the precarious labour of professional, competitive game players leads them to 'make instrumental choices to try and endure' (p. 336). Brock highlights the rationalisation of match-fixing as one consequence when work and play become conflated[19]. Caillois himself summarised the effect of the real world's contamination in this way:

> What used to be a pleasure becomes an obsession. What was an escape becomes an obligation, and what was a pastime is now passion, compulsion, and source of anxiety. The principle of play has become corrupted (Caillois 2001, pp. 44-5).

This is also an excellent description of the effect of gamification. Users are locked into a system by a pattern of rewards with little regard for the appeal of the activities they are required to perform. Gamification uses the language of play but disregards its principles. In the way it is frequently implemented, gamification is the ultimate realisation of instrumental 'play' where outcomes override all else.

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[19] It is also likely that a conflation of work and play contributes to the widespread 'crunch culture' in the game development industry. For example, a notorious article written by software engineer Alex St. John (2016) argues that 'making games is not a job—it's an art' and suggests that game developers should be working 80 hours per week 'out of sheer passion'.

Notions such as the 'ludification of culture' (Raessens 2006) and a 'ludic century' (Zimmerman 2014) point out the increasingly pervasive presence of games and play in people's everyday lives. But the actual implementation of gamified systems suggests that a 'gameful world' (Walz & Deterding 2014), rather than being liberatory, is more likely to involve the co-option of ludic practices in service of hegemonic social and economic systems and ideologies. Kirkpatrick (2015a) takes this further, using the term 'ludefaction' to describe 'an obstruction or misdirection of the play principle itself' (p. 516). Echoing Huizinga, Kirkpatrick suggests that this misdirection of play ultimately inhibits our ability to imagine radical alternative realities. When play is co-opted in these ways, players are controlled rather than freed, pleasure is used rather than prioritised, and play is subsumed rather than valued in itself. The conflict between play and instrumentality therefore has great consequence for the place of digital play and games in modern societies. Play may be increasingly pervasive, but its legitimation and hence its implementation is structured by overriding demands for productivity.

Conclusion

These past two chapters have analysed patterns of legitimation and delegitimation in newspaper coverage, and highlighted a significant contrast in the discursive techniques employed. As noted in Chapter 3, effect orientation is used to delegitimise play, especially children's play which is constructed as harmful in various ways. In contrast, the instrumental uses of digital games outlined in this chapter are legitimised using means orientation; games are played to achieve some legitimised goal. Games can be used for education or health benefits, or as a form of work. The overall result of these discursive techniques is to construct the act of digital play as inherently harmful to young people and largely lacking in value for adults, while also being a practice that can be *used* for productive ends. It is this careful management of digital play to achieve goals beyond the act of play itself that is legitimised in newspaper coverage. Instrumental digital play thereby offers a way to redeem pleasurable play, which might otherwise be considered wasteful or harmful. For players outside of the normative young male identity, instrumental play offers a way to be productive, which is important

for these non-normative players such as women and the elderly (Chess 2010; Iversen 2016). Children's digital play can be managed by parents or educators to achieve positive outcomes, legitimising a practice that has long been a focus of anxieties.

This discursive contestation over the value and legitimacy of digital play is an ongoing feature of newspaper coverage of games. Instrumental uses legitimise play, but do not simply negate the devaluing of play on other grounds. Instead, play is at once perceived as wasteful and also potentially useful. As is clear from the way industry groups mobilise these same instrumental uses, attempts to establish the relevance of games to other fields such as health and education are deliberate strategies aimed at increasing the value of gaming capital. Underlying these strategies is the hegemonic imperative of productivity. To legitimise play beyond the internal values of gaming's field, it must be shown to be productive. Specifically, play is legitimised in mainstream coverage when it is demonstrably performed in accordance with the value placed on economic productivity in modern capitalist societies. Play is legitimised in this way, but it is also changed. Play is generally characterised by freedom, creativity, and the intrinsic motivation of those involved. But if play is instrumentalised, institutionalised, and bureaucratised—if it becomes work-like—its possibilities for creativity and freedom are compromised. Play is co-opted by prevailing ideologies and becomes a tool for the achievement of goals. Legitimising digital play on instrumental grounds therefore necessitates a diminution of playfulness.

The ongoing tensions between pleasurable and instrumental play have important implications for players. Fortunati (2015, p. 301) has observed a contradiction between the economic prosperity of the game industry and the social devaluing of play, noting that players today are left to negotiate 'an ambivalent, political, and social strategy which, on the one hand, strongly stimulates them to play and, on the other hand, discourages them from doing so.' The same kind of ambivalence is evident in newspaper coverage, in which instrumental play satisfies the productive demands of the field of power but is not able to overcome the devaluing of pleasurable play. At a time when games and play are increasingly pervasive, these tensions between pleasure and productivity are significant. As the last two chapters have established, newspaper coverage represents digital play as both harmful and helpful, both wasteful and

productive, leaving players caught between these conflicting strategies of de/legitimation. Having established this ambivalent construction of digital play as a social *action*, the thesis now turns to the valuing of games as cultural *objects* by exploring the value ascribed to them by participants in gaming's field.

5 Economy, technology, and art: value in gaming's field

The previous two chapters have analysed the discursive construction of digital play as a social practice in mainstream newspapers and found that the legitimation of play in these publications is contingent on its perceived productivity. In addition to exploring those ambivalent discourses around the *playing* of games, it is also important to consider how digital games are valued as cultural *objects*. As Bourdieu stated in reference to the 'artistic field', establishing the value of a cultural object is an integral part of producing that object:

> Cultural production distinguishes itself from the production of the most common objects in that it must produce not only the object in its materiality, but also the value of this object, that is, the recognition of artistic legitimacy' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 164).

This chapter therefore analyses the various ways in which games are recognised and configured as valuable; that is, as objects that are recognised by people as bringing some benefit to a society. As Bourdieu's sociological research and theory emphasises, the ways in which cultural objects are valued by individuals, groups, or institutions can differ greatly. To explore the discursive complexity in the production of the value of games, this chapter continues to analyse mainstream media coverage in the eight newspapers chosen for this study, and in addition also considers discourses more specific to enthusiast cultures by analysing 'feature' articles published by the game

websites *Eurogamer*, *Polygon*, *Gamespot*, and *GamesIndustry.biz*[20]. By considering both mainstream and enthusiast publications, the following analysis is able to identify significant differences in the way the value of games is established in these different sources.

Analysing these differing media discourses requires theoretical tools that allow us to conceptualise not only how the value of games is constructed in different ways, but also the roles of the media publications and the influence of wider societal power structures. Bourdieu's field theory, with its emphasis on the relational positioning of people, practices, and objects within social fields, is therefore well suited to the following analysis, which considers how these media publications contribute to the shaping of 'gaming's field'. Gaming's field is understood in this thesis as a social space occupied by individuals and companies (e.g. players, developers, and journalists), practices (e.g. playing, making, and writing about games), and objects (e.g. game software and hardware). Participants in gaming's field—which include the mainstream newspapers and enthusiast websites analysed in this study, as well as industry groups, developers, publishers, players, and so on—work to establish the value of games according to their own interests. The underlying basis of this analysis is that participants in the field have an interest in the perceived value of games and in their own 'gaming capital'; that is, their knowledges about games and play. Because these various participants have different interests, the value of games is recognised and established in ways that can sometimes be competing and contradictory, as this chapter will detail. In particular, in the following analysis, the valuing of games is considered in the context of the struggle for autonomy in gaming's field. This struggle involves efforts by enthusiasts to establish games as valuable in their own right, as distinct from the 'heteronomous', or external,

[20] The feature articles represent only one part of these websites' total publication output, and this chapter does not aim to specifically analyse what constitutes a high- or low-quality game as would be established in game reviews. This kind of evaluative discourse certainly appears in feature articles at times and is discussed where relevant, but feature article content is analysed here in order to explore somewhat broader enthusiast discourses in and around games. Feature articles are very useful data for analysing how games are valued because they cover issues that these enthusiast publications deemed important during the data collection period of December 2013 to June 2014.

measures of value that characterise broader societal power structures, or the 'field of power'. Bourdieu (1993, p. 40) established that a field's autonomy is defined by:

> the extent to which it manages to impose its own norms and sanctions on the whole set of producers, including those who are closest to the dominant pole of the field of power and therefore the most responsive to external demands (i.e. the most heteronomous).

For Bourdieu, the encompassing field of power is characterised especially by economic power, and so the struggle for autonomy involves the disavowal of economic measures of value and the establishment of autonomous values internal to the field. The way participants in gaming's field position games can therefore be considered in relation to the heteronomous and autonomous 'poles' of the field.

To explore the tensions between these poles of gaming's field, this chapter begins by analysing how mainstream newspapers position games as productive of economic capital. This economic productivity further reflects the previous chapter's analysis of how digital play is legitimised when performed for productive, instrumental purposes. Digital games, as cultural objects, are likewise valued by their (economic) productivity. However, as will be seen, enthusiast publications attempt to resist this positioning by instead constructing the value of games in other ways, and thus some key differences between the newspapers and enthusiast publications begin to emerge. Exploring these differences further, the chapter analyses how the enthusiast websites place a significant focus on the 'potential' of games and argues that 'potential' in itself forms a core value of consumer-focused enthusiast game cultures. These discourses of potential are fuelled by continual technological development that promises games will always get better over time. The analysis of these discourses finds that this valuing of potential is nonetheless underpinned by the economic interests of hardware manufacturers, and as a result the 'potential' of games remains bound up with heteronomous, economic values. Standing in contrast to both economic and technological value is an important but ambiguous discourse of games' artistic value, in which enthusiasts seek to establish autonomous values of gaming's field. This way of valuing games constructs them as a serious and mature art form. However, this discourse encounters obstacles in the form of an apparent need to overcome 'mainstream' perceptions of games, as well as common

ways of understanding games as 'fun' entertainment. These are diverse claims to the value of games: as economically valuable, as a form of technology with immanent potential, and as an art form. However, what is shown by all these ways of positioning games is that establishing the value of games necessarily involves attempts to overcome negative cultural perceptions of them. These publications variously seek to position games as productive, promising, mature, and serious. The historical devaluing of games as wasteful, childish, and trivial therefore continues to shape the ways in which games are positioned as valuable cultural objects.

Economic value: games at the heteronomous pole

To begin exploring the construction of the cultural value of games, this section analyses how games are frequently positioned by mainstream newspapers at the heteronomous pole of the field; that is, valued for their economic productivity. In analysing this economic valuing, this section includes coverage of games as cultural objects to be traded, along with the hardware that runs them, and coverage of the producers of these objects, meaning game companies and the broader game industry. The previous chapter analysed the centrality of productivity, especially economic productivity, to the legitimation of digital play. In light of this, it is no surprise that games as cultural objects are valued in the same way. As the game industry has continued to grow over the decades, the industry's economic power has been the subject of a great deal of media coverage. A *New York Times* article (1 Dec 2013) by a film critic notes that it is 'no longer news that video games are, measured in dollars and hours spent by the young, bigger than movies'. The argument that games are 'bigger than movies', or any other industry that might be used as a comparison, generally comes down to an economic measurement. In the newspaper corpus there is a clear interest in the economic power of games, and this is also the case to some extent in the enthusiast game websites. In the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*, which have a particularly strong business focus, newsworthy stories include the financial performance

of game companies, or new products such as game consoles entering the market[21]. A representative example of this economic interest is a *New York Times* article (24 Jan 2014) that reports on Microsoft's quarterly earnings, and notes that the company has shifted its focus from software development to becoming a hardware maker and 'online services' provider:

- 'The holidays are an especially strong time for hardware sales, and they offered a good test of the company's evolving focus. The new Xbox One turned out to be one of the most highly sought gifts this year, and Microsoft's new versions of the Surface tablet received better reviews than its first tablet offerings.

  'Those sentiments translated into sales. Microsoft sold 7.4 million Xbox consoles, including the Xbox One and the older Xbox 360, up from 5.9 million a year ago' (*New York Times*, 24 Jan 2014).

This is a simple but notable example of how digital games are valued for their economic productivity. Within a different discourse—such as coverage about young people—high sales figures like these could just as easily be used to express anxieties about excessive play of the kind Chapter 3 detailed regarding children's digital play. Within these business and finance discourses, however, the sales of Microsoft's hardware, including Xbox consoles, legitimises digital games because they contribute to the company's success in the context of hegemonic discourses of capitalist economic production. To some extent these discourses implicitly legitimise the play practices of consumers, whose purchases drive this financial success, but it is primarily games as objects, which can be bought and sold, that are valued.

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[21] Appendix A contains Leximancer concept maps for the newspapers, in which these business and finance discourses in newspapers are evident. Concepts produced in the Leximancer analysis, such as 'company', 'business', 'million', 'billion', 'percent', 'chief', and 'executive', are all indicative of these discourses. The names of specific companies and consoles—'Microsoft', 'Nintendo', 'Xbox One' and so on—also form part of these discourses.

A noteworthy example of this financial interest is coverage in the *Los Angeles Times* of the website Twitch.tv, which is dedicated to streaming video of game play[22]. Twitch.tv is based in San Francisco, making news of its success a geographically local story for the *Los Angeles Times*, and the newspaper published two articles in May 2014 about the company. While these articles discuss livestream viewing as a significant cultural phenomenon, it is the economic side of the story that prompted the paper's interest. These articles appeared after rumours emerged that YouTube was in discussions to acquire Twitch for $1 billion (it was eventually acquired by Amazon). The articles acknowledge that Twitch is 'not a household name' and express some surprise at the size and engagement of their customer base, but hail the company as 'one of Silicon Valley's hottest start-ups' (*Los Angeles Times*, 25 May 2014). Here again, the economic value of a gaming-related business validates games as objects to be traded and thus productive of economic capital. This is the case even though—in a reflection of Chapter 3 and 4's findings regarding the conflicting discourses of digital play—the activity involved in this example is considered slightly strange or surprising. One article notes that watching other people play games on the internet 'might seem weird', but that 'Twitch's stats say otherwise', noting that it is 'the largest live-streaming site on the Web' (*Los Angeles Times*, 25 May 2014). What initially seems 'weird' is normalised and legitimised by the popularity of the website and the economic success of the company. A similar example of a Californian start-up attracting heavy media coverage is Oculus VR, whose acquisition by Facebook was extensively covered in March 2014. This is explored in detail in Chapter 7's analysis of virtual reality coverage.

Such an interest in the business and financial aspects of digital games features in all the newspapers, but to different degrees, reflecting the differing extents to which business news is a focus for each media outlet. For instance, the tabloid newspaper *The Sun* rarely reports on the financial performance of game companies. Instead, economic discourses are realised through a focus on consumers, with articles reporting on purchasing patterns or outlining games and other products available to buy.

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[22] 'Twitch' appears as a concept on the Leximancer concept map for the *Los Angeles Times* (see Appendix A).

Unsurprisingly, this is particularly the case in December with Christmas approaching, and games are expected to be popular presents: 'Eight out of ten parents will buy their child a tablet, laptop or games console for Xmas, Disney Club Penguin found' (*The Sun*, 18 Dec 2013). While the newspapers differ in the degree to which economic discourses are used to value digital games, the generation of economic capital contributes to the newsworthiness of game coverage.

To further contextualise this valuing of economic productivity, it is worth considering how publications by game industry groups emphasise the economic power of games and game companies. A periodic report from the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) details the impact of the digital games industry on the United States economy, including employment figures and contribution to US GDP (Siwek 2014). Despite its sole focus on economic factors, the report is simply titled *Video Games in the 21st Century*. For this major industry group, economic power is clearly a primary means of valuing and legitimising games. The ESA's annual report, *Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry* (2018), similarly covers economic factors, such as the $36 billion spent on the industry in the United States in 2017, and the industry's $11.7 billion value to US GDP. These economic factors dominate the report, along with demographic information that seems designed to counter common stereotypes about players (namely, the average game player is not young but rather 34 years old). In this report, economic data is presented in a way that seems to speak for itself: games are big business and are therefore valuable. Through these publications, the ESA seeks to influence perceptions about games, including media narratives.

Notably, the game industry's economic value is also recognised by governments. Government publications from the four countries from which this study's data is drawn highlight the industry's economic value, placing games alongside other creative industries such as film, television, radio, music, and so on. The 2009 *Digital Britain* report (Department of Culture, Media and Sport 2009), released by the British government, outlined proposals to support the UK game industry by offering tax relief to game producers, as well as improving and retaining a skilled workforce to grow the industry. In Australia, the 2013 *Creative Australia* policy outlined the federal government's plan to grow the 'creative economy', including by supporting the

Australian game industry, which was described as ‘a significant employer’ (Australian Government 2013, p. 81). The policy included plans for a A$20 million Interactive Games Fund to help independent game developers, though this fund was cut in 2014 after a change of government. In the United States, creative industries policy tends to be handled by cities and regions rather than nationally (Flew 2012, pp. 39-40). In Texas—the second-largest US state for game development in terms of employment, behind California—the Texas Film Commission offers financial incentives for game projects and calls the state ‘a growing hub for production’ (Texas Film Commission 2019). Tax incentives have also played an important role in Canada, where several major game companies, including Ubisoft and Electronic Arts, have created studios in a number of cities, most notably Montreal (Arsenault & Guay 2015). An investment corporation controlled by the government of Québec describes the province as ‘an international video game hub’ (Investissement Québec 2014). These policies and initiatives demonstrate various governments’ recognition of games as a creative industry whose value comes from its production of economic capital and jobs.

As a global creative industry, the digital game industry can boast of economic power and influence (eds Huntemann & Aslinger 2013; Kerr 2006; Kline, Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter 2003). Gaming is the site of production, distribution, and consumption practices that generate economic capital, and as a result games have figured as an important creative industry in economic policy discourse. As governments, particularly in advanced industrialised countries, adjust to the decline of traditional manufacturing industries, creative industries have become increasingly recognised as important contributors to economies. Tremblay (2011, p. 290) points out that when the British Government redefined the creative industries in its 1998 *Creative Industries Mapping Document*, the additional revenue added by the inclusion of digital games and other software development in the new definition allowed ‘creativity’ to be positioned as ‘the main driving force of the economy’. Oakley and O’Connor (2015) argue that this emphasis on creativity shifted the focus from cultural expression to the innovative activities of those employed in these industries: ‘Questions of value other than innovation and other economic impacts were dropped’ (Oakley & O’Connor 2015, p. 3). At this time when policy discourse has been concerned with ‘the utilization of culture as economic resource’ (O’Connor 2015, p. 376), the digital game industry has

continued to grow, allowing its productive output and jobs growth to be foregrounded. In this context, the *Daily Mail* approvingly cites digital games as contributors to Britain's economy (26 Dec 2013; 11 Jan 2014). Furthermore, the digital nature of games helps elevate their position in policy and public discourses about 'information societies', 'knowledge-based economies', 'modernisation', and so on, because digital technologies are seen as 'new engines of economic growth' (Flew 2012, p. 11). The value of digital games in this regard has been furthered by the spread of smartphones and tablets, which has allowed many game companies to target new, lucrative mobile markets. Within discourses of a 'digital future', games have a useful role in introducing children to digital technologies and skills. As Chapter 4 detailed, one way that digital play is legitimised is to use games to teach programming skills, exemplifying the educational promise games are often thought to hold in preparing children for a world dominated by digital technology. From this perspective, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter's (2009) critique of the digital game industry is an important reminder of the intertwined nature of the game industry and global capitalism. In their analysis, games function as a tool of capitalism's global power (while still being capable of resisting it). These authors point to the origin of digital games in 'the machine system central to postwar capital's power and profit—the computer' (p. xviii) and recruit Foucault's (1998) concept of biopower to analyse how game companies leverage the 'work' of players for the pursuit of profit (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter 2009, pp. 123-51).

The positioning of games at the heteronomous pole of gaming's field, as economically valuable, thus relies on the logic of the field of power, wherein political and economic power is primary (Bourdieu 1993, p. 39). Games are positioned as valuable products in that they contribute to the established economic order through the revenue generated by game companies, including developers, publishers, and distributors. These companies are positioned as valuable assets to the larger economy, prompting the financial coverage in newspapers. Publications by industry groups and governments further demonstrate how games are legitimised in terms of economic success. For producers in gaming's field, including developers and publishers, this positioning of games opens up valuable opportunities, such as the government funding and tax incentives mentioned above. In this way, the gaming capital possessed by these participants in the field, including their knowledge about how to make and sell games, becomes increasingly

valuable because it can be more easily converted into economic capital. However, at the heteronomous pole of the field the interests of enthusiasts are far less prominent. As far as the field of power is concerned, a game being 'well-designed', for example, is almost meaningless except in so far as it might make sales success more likely. While games have been successfully established as economically valuable, this will not satisfy enthusiasts who value them in other ways. The next section looks more closely at enthusiast discourses and explores how the 'potential' of games features as an important value in itself.

Technological development and the immanent potential of games

While economic measures of value are clearly expressed in newspaper coverage, it is to be expected that enthusiast publications would appreciate games for more intrinsic reasons, and identifying and analysing struggles over these differing forms of value is the key aim of this section. Struggles over the positioning of games in the field crystallise around their economic valuation, since a field's autonomy is sought *from* such external, heteronomous forms of value. Discourses of games as artistic clearly show these attempts to establish the autonomy of the field, and these are explored later in the chapter. But first, this section considers another significant aspect of the coverage in all four enthusiast publications that emerges from attempts to value games on their own merits: an emphasis on the 'new' and the 'promising'. Because these websites focus on new and upcoming products—both games and hardware—a significant feature of their coverage is the prevalence of discourses of *potential*. This section outlines these discourses, focusing in particular on how these websites position game hardware as promising and exciting, in that technological developments are thought capable of delivering desirable experiences. Based on these findings, this section argues that the game industry's continual production of new hardware fuels this enthusiast preoccupation with the potential of games and the technology that powers them. The result is that enthusiast publications discursively position games as a form of technology that will always get better over time, and in this way the 'potential' of games forms a core value of consumer-focused enthusiast cultures. However, establishing the potential of games on the basis of continual technological development binds them to the

economic interests of hardware manufacturers, fuelling patterns of continuous consumption. As a result, this potential is unavoidably shaped by the same heteronomous values of gaming's field that enthusiasts seek to resist; that is, economic measures of success.

Firstly, it is worthwhile to consider the balance of content in the enthusiast publications' feature articles to get an initial view of the kind of content they focus on. Figure 5.1 shows the websites' feature article content sorted by subject matter.

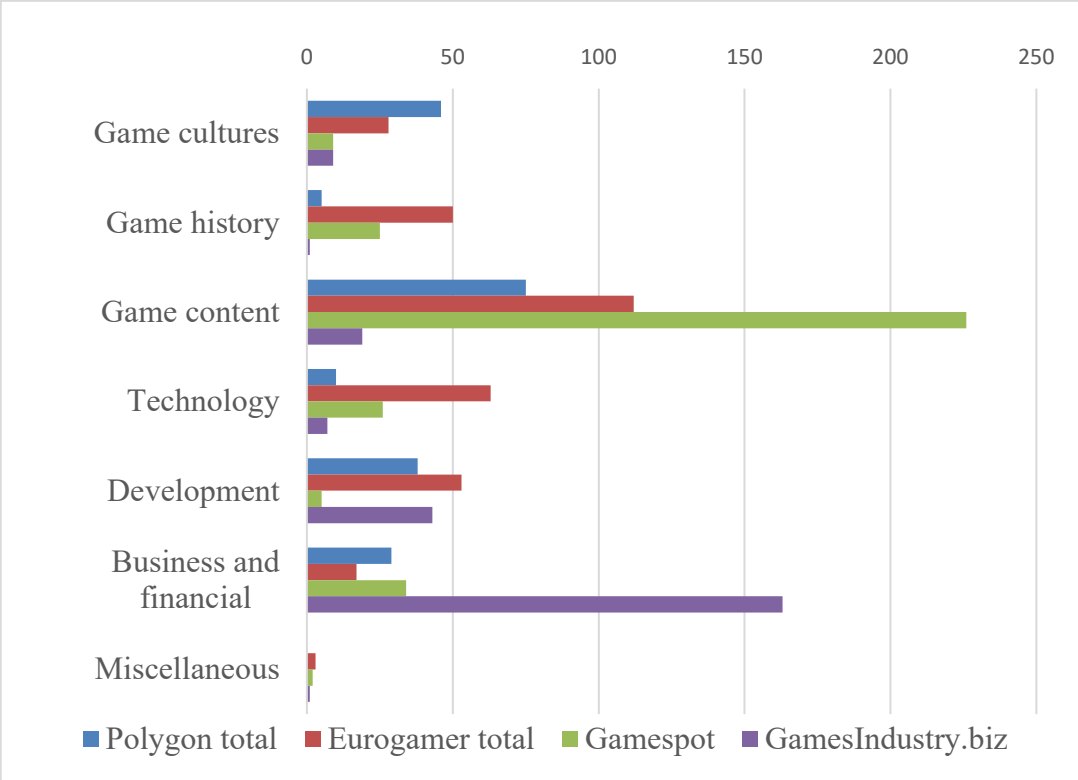


Figure 5.1 Enthusiast game website feature article content sorted by the primary article subject[23]

[23] While articles may involve more than one kind of subject matter, this graph shows the primary emphasis. 'Game cultures' includes articles about how and why people play games, as well as cultural issues in game development and game play such as gender diversity. 'Game history' is comprised mainly of retrospective articles about older games. 'Game content' articles are focused mainly on the content of specific games, including previews of upcoming games and 'game of the year' award articles. 'Technology' includes articles about hardware, especially *Eurogamer*'s 'Digital Foundry' series that

Business and financial discourses dominate the industry-focused *GamesIndustry.biz*, which often publishes articles on company performance, industry trends such as business models, and interviews with developers and publishers about these topics. This is the content most similar to the economic discourses found in newspaper coverage, as discussed above. The other game websites also cover similar topics at times, but these articles are generally from a 'player' perspective, as befits their readership. For example, articles about the poor sales of Nintendo's Wii U console tend to focus upon reasons why people are not buying the console. An article may cover the Wii U's market performance but will foreground critiques of the console and its games rather than purely business news. For example, a *Eurogamer* opinion piece (1 Feb 2014) addresses the relatively low sales of Nintendo's Wii U and Sony's Vita handheld, but rather than reflecting on the implications of this for the companies, the author calls these consoles 'future cult classics in the making' and encourages readers to buy them 'if you're into the business of enjoying games rather than just dry business'. Good game design and positive play experiences are highly valued here, and these aspects are placed in opposition to pure business concerns which would present sales figures and profits as the primary measures of success. The ability to reject economic imperatives and instead critique games on other merits—as well-designed and enjoyable, for instance—shows how, within the enthusiast websites in particular, games are valued as creative cultural products in their own right, not solely as economically productive.

The suggestion in *Eurogamer* (1 Feb 2014) that the Wii U and the Vita are 'future cult classics' hints at an important aspect of the enthusiast media coverage that deserves close analysis: its frequent focus on the potential of games. While the notion of potential can be realised linguistically in many ways, even looking at the word itself immediately shows how frequently it appears in the game websites. Using Leximancer to check the frequency of the word 'potential' returns these results:

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analyses hardware performance. 'Development' includes articles about game development practices, including interviews with game designers.

Table 5.1 Leximancer query results for 'TERM:potential' in the enthusiast website data

Website	Search results for 'potential'
Polygon	48
Eurogamer	132
Gamespot	63
GamesIndustry.biz	160

Contrasting this with the newspapers emphasises just how common the discourses of potential are in the enthusiast websites. The notion of potential marks a significant difference between the newspapers and game websites vis-à-vis the coverage of digital games, and thus the discursive positioning of them:

Table 5.2 Leximancer query results for 'TERM:potential' in the newspaper data

Newspaper	Search results for 'potential'
Daily Mail	4
The Sun	4
New York Times	21
Los Angeles Times	11
Toronto Star	6
Vancouver Sun	2
Herald Sun	2
Sydney Morning Herald	3

Figure 5.2 below shows a breakdown of the enthusiast website results to indicate the various discourses of potential. As would be expected in websites that cover new and upcoming games, much of this talk of potential concerns the quality of particular games; a game currently in development may end up being good quality in terms of its design, aesthetics, and other criteria typically judged in game reviews. For instance, *Eurogamer* tells us that 'it won't take too long to see if *The Forest* [Endnight Games 2018] can live up to its wondrous potential' (13 Jan 2014), and *Gamespot* reports that 'the fun was undeniable: *Dreadnought* [Six Foot & Yager 2017] is teeming with potential' (15 Jun 2014). A game's commercial potential is also a common issue,

particularly in *GamesIndustry.biz* with its focus on business and industry; this website accounts for the majority of the 'commercial potential' results in Figure 5.2. Another kind of potential involves in-game content and actions of players. Because actions and outcomes within games can typically be influenced by players, the exact content of a game is unknown until the moment of play. An example is when a *Eurogamer* writer finds that the game *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), with its expansive game world and emphasis on player freedom, is 'full of prospects and potential' (*Eurogamer*, 18 Apr 2014). The potential of gaming itself is also expressed, as when a Polygon writer says that the game *Papers, Please* (3909 2013) is 'an example of gaming's potential to test story-telling boundaries' (20 Mar 2014). As these examples show, 'potential' is expressed in relation to numerous aspects of games.



Figure 5.2 Discourses of potential in the enthusiast game websites' feature article content (excluding instances of 'potential' not in reference to games)

The most significant discourse of potential in these publications, for reasons that will be explored in the rest of this section, concerns new game platforms or hardware which may promise new features or abilities. A major area of interest in this regard is virtual reality (VR) technology specifically; at the time of data collection, several companies

were actively developing VR hardware, and many game journalists had access to in-development versions. A report in *Eurogamer* provides an example of the widely optimistic reception of VR technology: 'After our hands-on experience [with Sony's Project Morpheus VR device], the potential here is intoxicating: virtual reality could well become the true next-generation in interactive entertainment that we've been waiting for' (*Eurogamer*, 25 May 2014). Also regarding VR, a *Polygon* article (4 Dec 2013) quotes a game developer saying that 'with Oculus Rift, the potential to create emotions is so much greater [than with older game technology]'. Coverage of VR is the focus of Chapter 7, where the positioning of it as 'the future' of games is analysed in detail. Other hardware developments are also met with optimism, such as the release of new consoles which had occurred shortly before the data collection period for this study. A *Polygon* article (12 Dec 2013) demonstrates the value that this new console hardware is thought to provide. The article's writer chastises the game *Battlefield 4* (EA DICE 2013) for not taking advantage of the 'potential' of new consoles which had recently been released. *Battlefield 4* is an interesting case of a game that straddled the 'generational' transition to new game hardware, as it was released on the new consoles (Xbox One and PlayStation 4) as well as their previous iterations (Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3). The *Polygon* writer states that '*Battlefield 4* could have been the most cogent, inescapable demonstration of an experience that eighth-gen consoles could provide but seventh-gen consoles decidedly could not', but that performance and design issues mar the game. As part of this critique, the writer makes the point that 'neither of the eighth-gen consoles are blowing anyone away with their improved visuals'. However, this is not a repudiation of the new consoles; the writer notes that 'it's generally-understood that it will take developers up to a year to get a handle on and coax out the potential of the new hardware'. The potential of the hardware itself to deliver improved play experiences is unquestioned, and the writer suggests that it is up to game developers to learn how to take advantage of it.

The importance of hardware developments in the shaping of gaming cultures can be seen in a series of articles published by *Gamespot* in January 2014, titled 'Why you should buy a [particular game system] in 2014'. These articles present arguments for why readers should buy a range of home consoles, PCs, and handheld systems. The arguments include the quality of games available, the promise of good games to be

released in the future, and the quality and capability of the systems' hardware. Interestingly, while these *Gamespot* articles still value the raw power of the hardware—the game *Killzone: Shadow Fall* (Guerrilla Games 2013) is 'an impressive showcase of the PS4's power' (*Gamespot*, 29 Jan 2014)—they place more emphasis on new features, visual appearance of the physical hardware, or value for money. While it might be expected that arguments for buying a PlayStation 4 or Xbox One would focus on the consoles' new and powerful components, instead we are told that the PlayStation 4's 'sleek monolithic vibe … just screams cool', and that it fits nicely among other audio-visual equipment. The console is presented as a kind of lifestyle purchase; it is something a tech-savvy and stylish consumer would be happy to own. The article also compliments the PlayStation 4's new controller as 'a wonderful thing' that is pleasing to use and that features a touchpad with 'potential'. Similarly, the Xbox One article judges the console to be 'as sleek and shiny' as the PlayStation 4, and assures us that 'buying an Xbox One means buying into potential' due to its Kinect motion tracking hardware, 'a forward-thinking technology that will likely become second nature for gamers in the coming year'[24]. As this last quote demonstrates, articles such as these that emphasise the potential of game hardware play an important role in defining a 'gamer' identity and a particular kind of gaming culture. This culture is shaped by the construction of these platforms as desirable consumer products with 'sleek and shiny' aesthetics, and new and upcoming games endow them with the promise of entertainment in the future.

The role of these publications in shaping game player identities in relation to value claims is important to consider as part of this analysis, and will be expanded upon in subsequent chapters which look at the construction of 'authentic' games and platforms. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2009, pp. 80-84) make the important point that in addition to creating hardware and software, influential actors in the game industry also shape game-playing subjects such as the 'hardcore' gamer. Enthusiast websites such as *Gamespot* cooperate in this creation of subject identities, seen in the above quotes when console hardware is linked to a kind of game-player habitus; a new console is a machine

[24] This optimism later proved to be misplaced, as Microsoft began selling the console without the Kinect peripheral and later ceased production of it as a consumer game device.

that ‘makes sense’ for this subject to purchase. The importance of these discourses of potential to player identities is demonstrated in Molesworth and Watkins’ (2016) interviews with enthusiast players. These researchers found that players would use digital play and consumption practices as ‘individualised, episodic progress’. For the study participants, achieving a sense of progression involved, in part, the collection of new hardware and games, which were perceived as always ‘getting better’ over time (p. 518). This continual improvement was then used as a marker of technological progress over the course of the players’ lives. Given the way these players used their gaming collections as a record of progression, it is easy to see the importance of the notion, evident in the enthusiast game websites, that game technology is filled with potential. Games and consoles are perceived as not only having improved over time, but as always continuing to do so. Importantly, Molesworth and Watkins (2016) argue that by considering digital game play and consumption as forms of progression, their participants were able to overcome the perception of digital play as frivolous. Their play became indicative of technological and personal progression, an important project that adults are expected to pursue—and games as artefacts are thus valued as enablers of this progress. For some of Molesworth and Watkins’ participants, this measure of progress through consumption is such an important aspect of gaming that it ‘take[s] precedence over the pleasure of play itself’ (2016, p. 518). Play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith (2001) makes a similar point about the links between play, consumerism, and self-worth. Because individuals can experience self-worth from material interactions with the economy, play ‘is found to be an especially suitable and often relatively cheap form of such free-choice consumerism’ (Sutton-Smith 2001, p. 179). Along the same lines, play scholar Thomas Henricks (2010, pp. 24-29) summarises how characteristics of play have changed over time, and argues that the postmodern era is marked by the ‘consuming player’. Henricks specifies digital games as particularly suited to a postmodern view of identity according to which ‘we do not inhabit but rather *play* our roles in society’ (2010, p. 28) and do so in part by selecting from and ‘consuming’ an array of cultural goods. In this way, the potential that new game hardware is thought to hold underpins enthusiast gaming cultures because this hardware is deemed capable of delivering desirable experiences.

The role of influential actors in gaming's field, including hardware manufacturers and enthusiast publications that cover their products, is crucial in influencing the aspects of games deemed to be of value in these future-focused gaming cultures. The continual release of powerful hardware and new features, controlled by manufacturers such as the console makers Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo, is an integral part of the digital games narrative. The history of digital games involves in large part a history of hardware advances, whether it is increasingly powerful hardware—as with the new 'generations' of PlayStations and Xboxes and the continual development of PC components—or the introduction of new kinds of hardware, as with Nintendo's introduction of motion control with the Wii, or the development of smartphone touchscreens. These new technologies always carry the promise of new and better experiences, and so game quality is discursively tied to these hardware advances (Keogh 2015, p. 154)[25]. The industry and players are always looking to the future as a result of the frequent cycling of home consoles, the continual development of computer components, the rapid releases of new phones and tablets, and the effective obsolescence of older hardware as new games are no longer made for it. The continual release of new hardware is a key part of what it means to be involved in a consumer-focused gaming culture; to participate in this culture is to commit to hardware cycles. While some players may continue playing games with 'outdated' hardware, they are prevented from playing new games and fully participating in the culture cultivated by publications such as those studied here, which place most of their focus on new and upcoming games. Dovey and Kennedy (2006, p. 52) use the term 'upgrade culture' to describe the focus on new technological developments and iterations. These authors note that, due to continual hardware advances, new media such as digital games 'will never stabilize' as other media have. This instability can be seen in the fact that despite digital and computing technology being decades old, various forms of it including games are still often

[25] This link between hardware and game quality is aptly demonstrated by Sony's decision to name the PlayStation 2 processor the 'Emotion Engine'. Marketing for the PlayStation 3 stated that its 'Cell' processor would result in 'incredibly detailed and interactive environments, more enemies, larger battles, and hyper-realistic game play' (Wesley & Barczak 2010, p. 113). By the time of the data collection period for this study, the PlayStation 4 website was advertising the new console's 'power' which would 'deliver new play experiences never before possible' and 'games with rich, high-fidelity graphics and deeply immersive experiences that shatter expectations'.

referred to as ‘new’ media. On this point, Sterne (2007, p. 18) notes that ‘computers and other digital media actually embody a different model of newness: computers have reached a point where their “newness” references other computers and not other media’. The continual developments and improvements keep new media ‘new’, and this is the case for game hardware as well as games themselves.

The prevalence of discourses of potential in the enthusiast game websites is due in large part to the game industry’s foundation on continual hardware development. In his analysis of discourses of technology, Roderick (2016, p. 115) explains how the discursive positioning of technology as linear progress presents ‘technological change as inevitable and intrinsically good’. However, what is hidden by this understanding of technological progress are the forces that drive change. In the case of digital game technology, hardware manufacturers’ continuing existence as profitable entities relies on the constant production of new technology and the need to convince consumers to purchase new versions every few years. Referring to each new wave of home consoles as a new ‘generation’ lends a sense of natural law to this cycling of hardware, which in reality is fuelled by hardware manufacturers following economic laws. As Sterne (2007, p. 19) phrases it, computers ‘are designed to be trash, to make room for future profits, additional hardware sales, and performance upgrades’. Given this planned obsolescence, it is little wonder that enthusiast websites are so intent on looking to a future that promises endless improvements, with all the exciting prospects an enthusiast readership is interested in. In this way, the discourses of potential that are so common in enthusiast game coverage support the capitalist economic underpinnings of the industry, and work in concert with the business and financial discourses discussed earlier. Games and their hardware platforms as constructed as desirable consumer products, even if they are valued in somewhat different ways in enthusiast and mainstream publications: as entertaining play experiences on the one hand, and as economically valuable on the other.

If games ‘will never stabilize’ (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, p. 52) due to never-ending hardware upgrades, the discursive emphasis on potential in enthusiast publications is unlikely to change. Potential is thus a consistent feature and value of enthusiast gaming cultures because it can never be fully achieved; games are always seemingly on the cusp

of something even better. One consequence of this, perversely, is a constant dissatisfaction with games. No matter what experiences they deliver, they can always be better, and supposedly inevitable technological advances promise that they will be. Enthusiast discourse relies on this continual technological development to position games as always improving and as inherently full of potential. The notion that games will always become better is significant in terms of the gaming capital held by participants in the field such as game players and journalists, as they are able to position themselves as experts with an interest in directing the possible futures of games. A stark example of this, which will be analysed in detail in Chapter 7, is how virtual reality technology is put forward as 'the future' of games. While technological development is not an end in itself, it is the means by which games are seen as always becoming better according to enthusiasts' preferences[26]. This entwinement of hardware development and enthusiast cultures has a major implication in terms of establishing values in gaming's field. It will always be difficult for enthusiasts to position games outside of economic measures of their value—in other words, to establish the field's autonomy—because the potential of games relies on continual technological development controlled and required by hardware manufacturers who must convince enthusiasts to buy new machines every few years. In this way, economic motives underpin enthusiast cultures. For games to be valued according to autonomous, internal forms of value, they would need to be recognised as culturally legitimate on their own terms, not just as a form of technology and not simply as economically productive. In the context of this struggle for autonomy, therefore, another highly important discourse concerns the artistic value of games.

Artistic value: games transcending games

Gaming's artistic credentials have long been a subject of discussion, but for all the fatigue the issue has caused, it is still very much unsettled. It is also a significant topic,

[26] In this regard, the values expressed by the enthusiast websites studied here are likely to differ from those of purely hardware-focused publications that routinely run tests to find the most powerful hardware on the market, using games as test platforms.

as Parker (2018) has argued in his analysis of the debate around film critic Roger Ebert's comments across 2005-2010 that games can never be art. Parker argues that this debate, while 'headache-inducing', is important to the history of games as cultural objects because it 'helped establish the terms and stakes of cultural and aesthetic legitimacy for digital games and continues to shape the ways in which games are engaged and judged in popular discourse' (2018, p. 99). In the publications analysed for the present study, there is little discussion of the question that motivated the Ebert debate ('are games art?'). Rather, digital games are commonly and unquestioningly referred to as an art form in the enthusiast websites, showing that this view of games is established among many writers for these websites. For example, a *Eurogamer* writer (10 Apr 2014) explains why he is searching for the 'perfect bug', meaning a glitch that actually enhances a game, describing his 'inkling that bugs might be for games what editing is to cinema—the one irrefutable contribution an art form makes to culture at large that somehow remains largely specific to the art form in question'. The writer makes an argument for the uniqueness of games in relation to other 'art forms', but there is no doubt about games' status as art. However, a number of articles in both the websites and some newspapers directly address the artistic status of games by questioning whether they are seen as artistic more widely; that is, outside of enthusiast game communities and cultures. The key question therefore is not 'are games art?' but rather 'do *other* people see games as art?' This is certainly a more interesting question because it indicates, firstly, that anxieties still persist among enthusiasts about wider, non-enthusiast perceptions of games as an art form, and secondly that this question is considered important in regard to ongoing attempts to establish the cultural legitimacy of games. The following analysis continues this chapter's exploration of struggles over the value of games in gaming's field by exploring the artistic discourse of games, specifically how writers for enthusiast websites and some newspapers seek to position games as an art form. Before beginning the analysis, it should first be noted that acknowledgment of, or arguments for, the artistic legitimacy of games are not found prominently in all publications. While it is present in all enthusiast websites to some degree, it is most prominent in *Polygon*. Among the newspapers, the *New York Times* is the publication that engages with the question of games' artistic achievements most often. The fact that this newspaper employs dedicated game critics, some of whom also write for enthusiast publications, is significant in this regard. The uneven expression of

the artistic discourse across publications indicates that it is emerging and contested; however, when this discourse is expressed, the features of it are quite consistent.

The artistic discourse of games expressed in these publications is complex, but the key elements of it can be seen in a *Eurogamer* article (1 Dec 2013) titled 'Taking games seriously'. This article is briefly examined here to identify these elements before they are analysed in detail in the remainder of the chapter. The author of the *Eurogamer* article writes that games have 'serious potential' as an expressive, artistic medium, and seeks to demonstrate this by highlighting increased academic work done on games. The author suggests that this academic attention is 'helping games through their adolescence and into adulthood'. A tension between commercial interests and artistic ambition is stated overtly when the author quotes a game critic and doctoral student:

- 'I would like to see a broader appreciation in the industry of the fact they are not creating products but creative works, that they are producing and influencing culture with every game they release, whether they want to or not. I would like to see more game developers respect themselves as artists, essentially, even if they still try to be profitable' (*Eurogamer*, 1 Dec 2013).

The importance of artistic value to the cultural legitimation of games is clear. What is meant by 'artistic' in this article comes down to 'expression'; the author considers it important for games to have something important to say about society or humanity, rather than just being entertaining. Specifically, the author writes that games are in a position 'to move outside of the bounds of idle entertainment and into the realm of the serious, and affecting', and this is further emphasised when the author writes that 'the will is there to do some something truly important with interactivity and to change the way we talk about games'. Evident in this article are the key features commonly evoked in discourses supporting the value of games as artistic objects. The first is a discursive distinction between games as *serious art* and games as *fun entertainment*. The implication from the latter quote is that games have so far not been 'truly important', and there is something wrong with 'the way we talk about games'. This is bound up with a tension between art and commerce, or between 'creative works' and 'products'.

The second feature is a structuring *maturation narrative* that suggests games are emerging into 'adulthood' by growing into an art form and thereby reaching their 'potential'. This linear narrative cements the tensions between 'art' and 'entertainment' by implying that games up until now have been 'adolescent' and not 'truly important'. The third key aspect of this discourse concerns the *need for recognition* of games as an art form, shown here by the use of academic attention to advance the artistic view of games. The fact that an established institution, academia, is used to make this claim suggests that recognition of games from outside the traditional boundaries of gaming's field is seen as important to their artistic legitimation.

These three elements of the construction of games as artistic will be explored further below by analysing additional examples from enthusiast websites as well as some newspapers. Broadly, attempts to establish the artistic legitimacy of games involves overcoming perceptions that games are trivial, fun entertainment, and instead arguing that they are mature, serious art. Significantly, cited examples of 'artistic' games are usually independent, or 'indie', games, which had become increasingly prominent in the years leading up to the data collection period for this study. What exactly constitutes an independent game is contested, but often refers to games made by small teams, which may be financially independent, or at least not funded by large publishers. Juul (2014) has also identified an 'independent style' which emulates older visual styles (pixelated graphics, for example) and thus signals a kind of authenticity and honesty when compared with the 'realism' of big-budget games. This is significant in light of the analysis above regarding the centrality of hardware advances to consumer-focused game cultures. As the following analysis will show, artistic 'indie' games are positioned very differently from games which may be valued in economic terms as high sellers, and games which rely on cutting-edge hardware. The artistic discourse analysed in this section therefore seeks to position artistic games at the autonomous pole of gaming's field, outside of economic measures of success. The following analysis considers the positioning of artistic games in the context of this struggle for autonomy. The analysis presented here does not aim to suggest whether the autonomy of gaming's field can or will be achieved on these artistic grounds; it instead describes the state of these attempts and concludes that they encounter various obstacles and are ultimately unresolved. Discursive conflicts between games as serious art versus trivial fun, as well as the

apparent need to convince others, especially the 'mainstream', of the artistic value of games, shows that the positioning of games as artistic has not managed to achieve autonomy for gaming's field.

Serious art versus fun entertainment

The contrast between fun and seriousness is a consistent and significant source of tension in discourses of artistic games. This has significant implications for the discursive construction of games because 'fun' is otherwise a very common feature of enthusiast game discourse. Table 5.3 below shows that 'fun' appears commonly in feature articles in the enthusiast publications. It is also significant that the newspapers with relatively higher occurrences of 'fun', such as the *New York Times* and *Herald Sun*, employ journalists to write specifically about games and publish game reviews. A typical example is a *Herald Sun* review (25 May 2014) declaring that *Mario Kart 8* (Nintendo EAD 2014) is 'a lot of fun' and a 'must have'.

Table 5.3 Leximancer results for 'TERM:fun' for each publication

Publication	Search results for 'fun'	Average per article
Eurogamer	214	0.65
Gamespot	198	0.59
Polygon	216	1.07
GamesIndustry.biz	112	0.46
New York Times	41	0.30
Los Angeles Times	11	0.18
Daily Mail	1	0.02
The Sun	13	0.13
Toronto Star	9	0.26
Vancouver Sun	2	0.08
Herald Sun	16	0.33
Sydney Morning Herald	2	0.07

However, in discursive constructions of games as artistic, the centrality of 'fun' is overtly disavowed. A clear example is a *Polygon* article (20 Mar 2014) about the 'indie' game *Papers, Please* (3909 2013). This game tasks the player with checking identification papers of people crossing the borders of an authoritarian state, and the player must make difficult decisions about these people's fate. The article's author writes that *Papers, Please* 'isn't "fun" in the traditional sense'; its treatment of a serious topic prevents it from being so. The game is described as an example of 'indie gaming's newfound confidence not merely to create fun diversions, but to say something meaningful, in ways that no other medium can emulate'. By claiming that 'no other medium' can do what *Papers, Please* does, the author stresses the interactivity of games; the game requires players to 'become a cog in that machine' of bureaucracy. The characteristics of artistic games advanced by the author begin to coalesce here: artistic games have something to say, deal with serious themes rather than being 'merely' fun, and do so by taking advantage of interactivity, thus distinguishing games from other media.

If it is not considered possible to have 'fun' when dealing with serious issues, the only way to establish titles like *Papers, Please* as examples of the artistic credibility of games is to challenge the perception that games necessarily need to be fun. One tactic for achieving this is to deny or sideline the entertainment value of games and instead foreground their artistic achievements. This same approach is taken in a *Los Angeles Times* article (9 Feb 2014) about 'a new generation of designers who are re-imagining the role of video games'. A game designer presents a dichotomy between art and the traditional action-packed perception of digital games:

- '"What's "blocking interactive media from being considered art is that most video games focus on primitive feelings of aggressiveness and competitiveness," said Oliveira, 23, a lifelong gamer who graduated from USC's interactive media program last spring. "Art is introspective. It makes you see the stuff that makes us human"' (*Los Angeles Times*, 9 Feb 2014).

The article further suggests that many people are becoming bored with violent games. It describes several games that focus on serious themes like poverty and addiction, and suggests that these can expand the game-playing audience and make the medium more culturally respectable. Again, there is a sense here that digital games have not met their potential: 'You can do more with this medium than make toys', the article quotes game designer David Cage. This negative appraisal of many games—that they are just 'toys'—invokes the perception that games are childish entertainment but should aspire to be more than they are. The article also quotes *Papers, Please* designer Lucas Pope, who rejects the notion that games need to 'entertain' their players: 'Games don't have to be a happy, fun thing … Games once had to be entertaining, but now games are another way to talk to people' (*Los Angeles Times,* 9 Feb 2014). The contrast between entertainment and art is also evident in a *Eurogamer* article about a game intended as a documentary about the JFK assassination (*JFK Reloaded*, Traffic Software 2004). The game's designer complains that 'people still see games as playful things and not a suitable medium for more serious application' (*Eurogamer*, 4 Jun 2014). These examples show attempts to position games as something different from the traditional perception of them. This involves a rejection of 'fun' as a central measure of a game's worth, as well as a privileging of a 'serious' artistic purpose.

As noted above, what this artistic purpose involves is games having something significant to say. It is considered important for digital games to have a positive impact on society, whether that is in the form of a political or social critique or through affective engagement that prompts players to reflect on their humanity. Other kinds of artistry involved in the creation of games—in terms of the design of visuals, audio, mechanics, and so on—are not in question here. In gaming's field, critique of these elements is well established in game reviews and other forms of game criticism, but they barely feature in discourses of games as artistic. What remains in question is the extent to which games and their designers reflect upon society, and this is generally shown by emphasising narrative and thematic content. These artistic discourses therefore have something in common with the instrumental purposes for play outlined in Chapter 4, in that there is a keen interest in establishing the relevance of games to other fields of social activity, thereby increasing their perceived value. In this regard, a *New York Times* article (22 Apr 2014) about the Games for Change Festival further

highlights this emphasis on the social value of games. While the article does not directly describe games as 'artistic', the language used is otherwise very similar to the examples above. The Games for Change Festival is about 'serious games' which are described as 'lesser-known titles that treat the medium as something more than entertainment' (*New York Times*, 22 Apr 2014). The suggestion that these games are *more than* entertainment invests them with more value than games that are merely entertaining, just like in the David Cage quote above which suggests games should be 'more' than they currently are. 'Serious games' are not a new phenomenon, but the article describes how, in addition to their previous focus on using digital play for education, serious games now involve 'more ambitious efforts' with 'altruistic goals' that 'seek social change' (*New York Times*, 22 Apr 2014). The article's title, 'Not just playing around anymore', further emphasises the contrast between seriousness and trivial fun.

Because 'fun' is a common way of evaluating games, the disavowal of it within an artistic discourse indicates a major tension in the discursive construction of games vis-à-vis attempts to establish their cultural and social value. If this value is to be sought in artistic achievement, it seems to require a dramatic reworking of 'the way we talk about games', as suggested by the earlier *Eurogamer* article (1 Dec 2013). Rather than fun and entertainment being desirable and central measures of value, instead the artistic discourse expressed in these publications elevates games with serious and expressive purposes.

Games 'growing up'

An objection may be raised that it is possible for artistic and fun games to coexist rather than compete, or perhaps a game can be both artistic and fun. Regardless of the arguments that may be made for this, the artistic discourse expressed in these publications does lead to a tension between these aspects. Indeed, following Bourdieu (1993, p. 30), this tension should be expected because positions in a field are established in relation to each other. Different kinds of games are necessarily positioned in gaming's field in a hierarchical relationship; this is made clear in examples above when artistic or serious games are described as worth *more than* other digital games (*Los*

Angeles Times, 9 Feb 2014; *New York Times*, 22 Apr 2014). Another major cause of the devaluing of 'fun' games is the maturation narrative that structures the artistic discourse, as in the earlier *Eurogamer* article (1 Dec 2013) that describes games as emerging 'into adulthood'. This article explicitly positions games up until this point as 'adolescent', and their maturation is dependent on a recognition of games as an art form. The other examples above likewise present a linear narrative of games reaching their artistic potential, which involves moving away from 'fun' as a measure of their worth. The same use of age-related metaphors is used in another *Polygon* article (10 Feb 2014). Here the article's author calls on console manufacturers to allow games rated 'Adults Only' in the United States to be sold on their platforms, something they currently do not permit. The author argues that AO-rated games should be permitted if the medium is to 'grow up'; games are depicted as a nascent art form held back by a perception that they are primarily toys for children:

- 'There is no other art form that begins with the presumption that the content will be consumed by a child, and then works backwards to make sure the content won't be damaging to that child' (*Polygon*, 10 Feb 2014).

A tension between economic and artistic interests is also directly raised when the author states a need for games to be free from commercial interference: 'Commerce is limiting the content that can be shown and experienced in games, and that's an intolerable state of affairs for a maturing art form' (*Polygon*, 10 Feb 2014). The author's argument is that, because AO-rated games are not permitted, game developers face a financial incentive to create games that will sell, rather than pursue their artistic ambitions. The distinction between childish entertainment and mature art is clear, and the transition from the former to the latter is characterised as 'growing up'.

The significance of a maturation narrative to an artistic game discourse can be further understood from two articles, by different authors, in the *New York Times* (2 Jan 2014), which look back on 2013's games and discuss notable trends. While these articles appear in the *New York Times*, both authors could be described as 'enthusiasts'. The first is Harold Goldberg, a founder of the New York Videogame Critics Circle, and the

second is Stephen Totilo, editor-in-chief of the enthusiast game website *Kotaku*. This is therefore a case of enthusiast discourse finding expression in a mainstream publication for a large and broad audience. The prevailing argument in both articles is that 2013 was characterised by a number of creative and expressive games that explore the human condition. These games are primarily seen as the work of 'indie' game developers, and so their artistic achievements are, to some extent, set against big-budget games that generate a lot of revenue for their creators. Goldberg is particularly emphatic about the achievements of independent game developers. In highlighting some standout independent games from the previous year, including *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer 2013) and *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe 2013), Goldberg argues that 'an indie can feature nuance like melancholy happiness [sic] and other unusual human emotions', and 'indies can offer solace to the marginalized in society'. The use of the word *can* gives these games extra significance. These particular games are well crafted, but more than that they are used to establish the ability of indie games to offer affectively meaningful experiences. Goldberg uses these titles to stake a claim for artistic value in gaming's field. In doing so he draws a clear contrast between indie games made by 'passionate coteries of video game artisans' and big-budget games, which he argues are often 'clichéd' and 'mine tradition' rather than offering something new. The 'mega Madden football franchise' is made by 'faceless hundreds', Goldberg writes, in contrast to independent games made by small, creative teams. While the big-budget titles *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013) and *Lego Marvel Super Heroes* (Traveller's Tales 2013) are described as 'laudable escapes from reality', the creations of small independent developers are deemed to be more deserving of praise. The achievement of artistic merit is thus characterised as a break from the more established and more visible output of the game industry.

The other *New York Times* article by Stephen Totilo directly addresses the issue of high sales figures being used as a measure of success. Totilo agrees that 'the feel-good story of the year was the continued rise of indie games', but also writes that 'in this industry, [big] companies also make art', citing the highly successful games *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013) and *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (Ubisoft 2013). However, he pointedly avoids discussing the high sales figures of *Grand Theft Auto V* (except to point out that he is not discussing them) because he deems these unimportant in arguing

that the game industry had a 'special year' in terms of producing artistic, expressive games. He posits that games are important cultural products regardless of the revenue they generate. But while he ostensibly dismisses economic success as a measure, it is perhaps easier to do this when *Grand Theft Auto V*'s popularity is already well established[27]. The cited examples of indie games—*Temple Run 2* (Imangi Studios 2013), *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013), and *Papers, Please* (3909 2013)—were all commercially successful, and the author notes that *Temple Run 2* was 'one of the year's most-played games'. Even this direct attempt to argue for the value of games outside commercial measures quickly falls back on popularity. These articles thus show the ambiguous state of these claims for gaming's artistic achievements. Indie titles are cited to show that games, or at least indie games, *can* do what other art forms do, but this claim is made overtly, showing that it is not thought to be widely accepted. Non-commercial measures of success are considered more important than making money, but this claim is not fully extricated from popular appeal. A contrast between art and commerce is clearly an important feature of these two articles, but it is expressed inconsistently. The articles are more consistent on the aspects of games they put forward as especially praiseworthy. They both construct a contrast between the new and the old—between experiences offered by these artistic games, and what games have traditionally offered. For Goldberg, big-budget games are 'clichéd'. In looking forward to the next year, he rejects the usual gaming power fantasies, writing 'here's to games that let me be a human with all my foibles and faults, not just a superhuman who always wins in the end'. For Totilo, the cited indie games are about refreshingly mundane subject matter; *Papers, Please* is 'about stamping passports', while *Gone Home* is 'about nothing more exotic than a teenage girl who decides to run away'. The language used to describe the big-budget games also privileges aspects that invite reflection by players, particularly the narrative and thematic content: *The Last of Us* is described as 'a beautifully upsetting game about fatherhood and postapocalyptic survival', and *Assassin's Creed IV* as 'a gorgeous, exciting, culturally rich game'. *Grand Theft Auto V* is described as an 'epic', apparently in reference to its storytelling. On the whole, these articles position artistic games as something new and different from what games have

[27] Having now sold over 100 million copies (Crecente 2018), *Grand Theft Auto V* is in fact one of the highest-selling digital games ever made.

been before, and in this way their arguments are structured by the same maturation narrative that sees games progressing towards a mature art form.

The language used in this narrative is what results in tensions between different constructions of games as these writers seek to establish the value of games as artistic cultural objects. As is always the case in fields of cultural production, objects, genres, and creators are placed in a relational hierarchy of value. Artistic games are not positioned as valuable in a vacuum, but rather in relation to other kinds of games. Positioning and valuing artistic games as serious and mature implies a devaluing of other kinds of games—such as the clichéd power fantasies Goldberg points to—as 'adolescent' and trivial. This relational positioning is expressed in the age-based metaphors employed in the maturation narrative. This relative devaluation is also noted by Parker (2013) in his analysis of the reception of the 2007 indie 'artgame'[28] *Passage* (Rohrer 2007). Parker describes how the evaluative discourse that has emerged around artistic games positions them as superior to other kinds of games, and in doing so accepts 'the very forms of distinction that actively deny most games status as art' (2013, p. 56). Because the privileging of artistic games involves a disavowal of common ways of understanding and evaluating games, this relational positioning in gaming's field leads to significant tensions and contestation over how games are understood as cultural objects.

The need for recognition

Establishing the autonomous values of a field requires that these values are recognised; games need to actually be acknowledged as an art form according to values and standards established by participants in the field. A recurring feature of the artistic discourse is the belief that games' artistic value is *not* adequately recognised. As for

[28] Parker (2013, p. 41) describes the term 'artgame' 'as a category, genre, or mode within the larger field of indie games' with emerging artistic legitimacy. This specific term only appears once in the data corpus for the present study, in a *GamesIndustry.biz* article (24 Apr 2014) about game design courses at colleges and universities.

who apparently needs to recognise this value, this is often expressed as 'the mainstream', which can be understood as people outside the boundaries of gaming's field, or at least outside its traditional boundaries as enthusiasts might see them. It is this mainstream, non-enthusiast perception that is at issue here. This is hinted at in Totilo's article (*New York Times*, 2 Jan 2014) in which artistic value is still bound up with popular appeal; it is evidently considered important that a large audience understands the expressive potential of games. The same approach is followed in the *Polygon* article (20 Mar 2014) about *Papers, Please* discussed earlier. While the article's author stresses the game's artistic credentials as a political critique, this is set against the 'mainstream' perception of games. The game's serious theme prompts the article's author to argue that it is 'a long way from the mainstream view of games, so often assumed to be frivolities and dumb escapism', again contrasting serious art with trivial fun. However, the author notes that the game 'has been cited by numerous outlets, from NBC to *The New Yorker*, as an example of gaming's potential to test story-telling boundaries'. He also finds it 'significant' that the game has sold half a million copies, meaning it is not a 'niche title'. The 'mainstream' is clearly thought to view games as frivolous and escapist diversions, and *Papers, Please* is put forward as a game that could change these perceptions. This keen interest in using the 'mainstream' to validate games points to an apparent need to overcome traditional ways of understanding digital games as trivial entertainment before they can reach their potential as a legitimised art form. It is indicative of the ambiguous state of these ambitions that the artistic validity of *Papers, Please* is not found in a disavowal of popularity, as is the case with 'consecrated' artistic works, but in an appeal to it. In more established fields of artistic endeavour, according to Bourdieu (1993), the autonomous pole of the field would be occupied by works and artists that disavow mainstream popularity. They are valued primarily for their artistic merit, whatever the specific field has deemed that to be, not for their popular 'success'. By contrast, in this *Polygon* article, legitimation of artistic games is seen to come from mainstream recognition.

An article in *GamesIndustry.biz* (6 Jan 2014) further demonstrates anxieties regarding 'mainstream' perceptions of games. Discussing media coverage of 'violent' games, the article's author argues that 'the non-gaming masses' have so far viewed games as 'colorful toys for children and ultraviolent toys for manchildren'. But the author argues

that this perception will shift due to the increasing prominence of a 'new breed' of 'narrative-driven games, commercially viable titles that would rather explore a collapsing relationship instead of collapsing skyscrapers'. The author cites *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013), *The Novelist* (Orthogonal Games 2013), and *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games 2016), all 'indie' games that 'are emerging from outside the framework of the traditional gaming industry', and which the author argues will help to show what is 'possible with the art form'. Just like earlier examples, this article characterises artistic indie games as a break from the industry's traditional output. Again, the fact that these games are 'commercially viable' is deemed important so that they can convince the 'mainstream' of the artistic achievements of games. More than any other example, this article shows that overcoming other people's perceptions of games is considered necessary to establish their artistic legitimacy.

The interest in mainstream perceptions indicates the need for recognition from outside gaming's field. But the artistic discourse also establishes a conflict within the field involving traditional and emerging player audiences. For example, in a *Los Angeles Times* article a journalist describes *Doki-Doki Universe* (HumaNature Studios 2013), a game designed 'to make players feel', and draws a distinction between this title and games which appeal to 'gamers':

- 'It's a game, [designer Greg] Johnson admits, that will likely be appreciated most by nongamers. "Gamers sit down and want to solve the problem. 'Where do I go? What do I do?' They're clicking buttons and solving the goals. They click right through text. People who are not in the gamer mode will read, watch it."

  'And if you do that?

  '"Life happens," Johnson says. "Stories play out. You get to know the characters."

  'Now that would truly be next-gen.' (*Los Angeles Times*, 22 Dec 2013)

There is a stark difference here between a constructed 'gamer' audience, which is assumed to be interested in the powerful 'next-gen' Xbox One and PlayStation 4 consoles, and new audiences for whom emotional engagement and character stories are more appealing than technological advancement. This same issue of disparate audiences is raised in a *Toronto Star* article (28 Jan 2014) about a new artist-in-residence at the Art Gallery of Ontario. This artist, Jim Munroe, is an independent game developer and novelist who is quoted as wanting to 'encourage the production and celebration of video games as an emerging international art form'[29]. A later article covering the exhibition raises the question of whether games can be considered art, and Munroe responds that 'that's a conversation I refuse to have in the gaming community, because it's so old and tired … But somewhere like here (the AGO), sure' (*Toronto Star*, 6 Feb 2014). The cultural context of an art gallery allows Munroe to express the notion that games are an art form, while among an established gaming audience the question is still considered vexed despite its long and 'tired' history. There are implications here for an established gaming culture that may not value artistic expression in quite the same way as the articles analysed above evidently do. Not all participants in a field will respond to changes in the field in the same way. Specifically, not all game players, including enthusiast 'gamers', will endorse the view that digital games are artistic creations, or more than entertaining diversions. Academic John Sharp (2015) has stated this very bluntly in his examination of the intersections of games and art, noting a variety of generalised perspectives on the issue:

> For the game industry, games are entertainment products. For those making artgames[30], games are a medium for artistic expression and experiential understanding. For those making game art, games are a means of questioning, critiquing, and exploring unexpected potentials. And so, when a game maker speaks of games, she is often imagining a creative potential radically different from a contemporary artist. And when a game player, even one interested in games outside the commercial mainstream, looks at a game, she sees something quite

[29] Two days later, a letter to the editor was published arguing that the gallery's appointment degrades the term 'artist' (*Toronto Star*, 30 Jan 2014).

[30] Sharp refers to 'artgames' as games with an artistic (reflective, expressive) purpose, and 'game art' as art made using game technology as tools and materials.

> different than a viewer familiar with the contemporary art scene (Sharp 2015, p. 15).

The issue of recognition in the artistic discourse is complicated by the perceptions about games believed to be held by an external 'mainstream' and by an internal audience of 'gamers' which is described as not valuing expressive and artistic games. It should be noted, however, that both these groups are genericised, and there are no expressly-stated positions in these publications against the artistic value of games, with the sole exception of one letter to the editor in the *Toronto Star* (30 Jan 2014). What can be clearly seen in this discourse is that there are ongoing anxieties among many enthusiasts that games are devalued culturally, and these perceptions are countered by positioning games as a form of art. These concerns with 'mainstream' perceptions and a 'gamer' audience's preferences ultimately relate to the same issue: a desire to overcome traditional understandings of games in order to stake a claim for their artistic value, and to have this value be recognised. It is significant that recognition is sought from institutions with established cultural legitimacy, including the art gallery in the above example, and academia in the *Eurogamer* article about 'taking games seriously' (1 Dec 2013). As Parker (2013) notes in his analysis of an emerging 'art world for artgames', institutions such as these play an important role in opening up possibilities for recognising, appreciating, and consecrating artistic games, which helps to establish the values by which these games are critiqued and legitimised. Rather than artistic recognition coming solely from internal changes to gaming's field, instead this discourse suggests that the boundaries of gaming's field must expand; new audiences must be found, the 'mainstream' must be convinced, and cultural institutions must recognise the artistic value of games.

The interest in new kinds of artistic expression, new audiences, and established cultural institutions is consistent with Bourdieu's explanations of field dynamics, particularly his account of how change occurs in a field (Bourdieu 1993, pp. 55-61). Changes to a field depend on both internal struggles and external changes[31]. In establishing the artistic

[31] While analysing all the internal and external changes that have contributed to an artistic discourse is beyond the scope of this chapter, two important changes deserve mention. The development of internet

value of games, the internal struggle seen in these publications involves positioning artistic games against the more common construction of games as trivial entertainment. In Bourdieu's words, the history of changes to a field:

> results from the struggle between those who have made their mark (*fait date*—'made an epoch') and who are fighting to persist, and those who cannot make their own mark without pushing into the past those who have an interest in stopping the clock, eternalizing the present stage of things (Bourdieu 1993, p. 60).

Positioning artistic games against 'fun' entertainment can therefore be expected to result in tensions, and this has indeed been the case, with artistic games derided by some game players as pretentious or not really games at all (Parker 2013, p. 54). The examples analysed here have shown that these tensions can be difficult to manage, with the discursive legitimation of artistic games attempting to overcome numerous obstacles, including the language used to talk about games, a traditional understanding of games as childish and trivial, and perceptions held by people both inside and outside gaming's field. In this discourse, games are required to transcend themselves by 'growing up' and gaining recognition as serious rather than fun, meaningful rather than trivial, and artistic rather than entertaining. Positioning games as an art form in this way is an attempt to establish autonomous values in gaming's field; however, the attempts are complicated by these obstacles. If a field's degree of autonomy is defined by 'the extent to which it manages to impose its own norms and sanctions on the whole set of producers' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 40), then the artistic discourse falls short of achieving autonomy because it is still evidently inhibited by 'mainstream' perceptions and by the need to disavow established ways of talking about and evaluating games that are otherwise still very prominent in these same publications. Based on this analysis, it is clear that artistic legitimacy is an unresolved and ongoing process with significant obstacles to overcome.

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infrastructure that has enabled digital distribution of games, along with the development of more accessible game development tools, has allowed more people to create and distribute games without relying on funding and distribution networks controlled by large publishers (Anthropy 2012). These material changes have allowed greater and more diverse participation in game development, leading to a dramatic growth in 'indie' game development. The prevalence of *Papers, Please* in the examples here—a game created by one person using open source tools and distributed digitally—is testament to the importance of these material changes to the discourse of games as artistic.

Conclusion

This chapter has been wide-ranging in its analysis of value in gaming's field, and some of the claims to value are competing or contradictory, not least the different interests involved in establishing games' economic and artistic value. However, there is a common goal held by participants in the field when they position games in the ways outlined here. All these various ways of valuing games involve overcoming perceptions that they lack cultural worth. What is therefore evident in these positionings of games are struggles over their symbolic value. What they mean and how they are valued as cultural objects is contested, unsettled, and sometimes ambiguous. However, this is not purely a struggle over meaning. It is important to consider what is at stake for participants in gaming's field when they seek to position games as one thing or another. These participants—including writers for the publications analysed here, as well as game developers, publishers, industry groups, players, and so on—all have an interest in improving their own positions and status in gaming's field, and the value of gaming capital is of crucial importance in this regard. As this chapter has outlined, this value is established in different ways. The economic value of games allows gaming capital to be more easily converted into economic capital (for example, more opportunities are available for developers to make and sell games, and for game journalists to write about them), while the artistic value of games allows participants to build the symbolic value of gaming capital, as long as games are adequately recognised in this way. As Bourdieu stressed, this accumulation of symbolic value can also eventually be converted into economic capital in the right circumstances, and so the way gaming capital is valued always has important material consequences.

These efforts to establish value succeed to varying degrees. Games are unquestionably economically productive, and this is advanced by industry groups and acknowledged by governments. The 'potential' of games, fuelled by continual technological development, works to drive interest in new and upcoming developments, and promises enthusiasts that games will keep getting better. Games are accepted as a mature, 'grown up' art form among writers for enthusiast publications, and the artistic value of games also

finds expression in a major newspaper in the *New York Times* in particular. Much like how the instrumental uses of digital play analysed in Chapter 4 operate as counter-discourses to the supposed wastefulness of pleasurable play, the forms of value analysed in this chapter push back against perceptions of games as trivial, childish, or wasteful. The preoccupation with the 'mainstream' view of games in the artistic discourse shows that overcoming negative cultural perceptions is an important motivating factor in how and where the value of games is sought. There is an interesting commonality here with Kirkpatrick's (2016) explanation of the state of gaming's field in the 1980s. Kirkpatrick describes how the logic of the field involves overcoming 'an initial problem or limit' and that 'a possibility space looms just beyond it which it seems as if the medium might, with improvement, come to fill' (2016, p. 1441). Some of these problems Kirkpatrick identifies are similar to those explored here, such as the attempts to position games as 'grown up' rather than childish, while others are more specific to the earlier time period, such as the need to establish 'gaming' as distinct from computing culture. It is significant, however, that decades later the value of games is still sought by attempting to overcome various 'problems' that seem to prevent the desired value of games from being realised. The discourses of potential take on extra significance in this regard, as they present games as always becoming something new and better, offering a (potential) way to overcome those problems.

Positioning games in these ways unavoidably leads to tensions because positions in a field are always relational. These tensions are most evident in the way the artistic value of games is established by positioning them against common ways of understanding and evaluating games as fun entertainment products. A common feature in the examples explored in this chapter is the way games are often positioned as something more, something better, and in the case of artistic games perhaps even something *else*. This may be unsurprising given the evident need to overcome the historical devaluing of games as cultural objects, but this contestation over what games are and what they are worth has significant implications. Struggles over the value of games involve elevating some over others, driven by the specific interests of participants in gaming's field. The following two chapters seek to explore this relational positioning in more detail by analysing coverage of two quite distinct kinds of games and platforms: mobile and virtual reality.

6 Mobile games and the value hierarchy in gaming's field

This chapter's analysis of mobile game coverage builds on the previous chapter's analysis of struggles in gaming's field. The previous chapter explored how digital games are positioned as valuable in mainstream newspapers and enthusiast websites in various ways, including economically, technologically, and artistically. These positionings were analysed in terms of the poles of gaming's field, with economic measures of value positioning games at the heteronomous pole, while enthusiasts' constructions of games as artistic attempt to position them at the autonomous pole where economic measures are disavowed. The chapter thus highlighted some ways in which the valuing of games and play differs across mainstream and enthusiast publications. At the same time as mainstream newspaper coverage uses economic value and instrumental uses such as education and health to legitimise games and play, struggles ensue in enthusiast publications over the value of *specific forms* of games and play. This chapter and the next seek to analyse these enthusiast struggles in more detail by focusing on two specific forms of games: mobile and virtual reality. Contestation over the positioning of games in the field is most evident in regard to new and emerging forms. At the time of data collection for this study, mobile games and virtual reality games were two such forms. As the mobile game industry continued to grow[32], virtual

[32] Mobile games are a recent development compared to console and computer games; Apple's iOS and Google's Android app stores both launched in 2008. At this time, by contrast, home game consoles were in their seventh 'generation', according to that common method of measuring home console advancements. While the history of mobile phone games stretches back to the 1990s, it was the advent of smartphones and Apple's and Google's app stores that resulted in the rapid growth of mobile games. In

reality was experiencing a potential revival as a consumer technology. These next two chapters explore the discursive construction of mobile and virtual reality games as—in both a colloquial and Bourdieusian sense—polar opposites. This first chapter focuses on mobile games, the recent and rapid growth of which makes them a particularly useful site of interrogation vis-à-vis the value that enthusiasts place on games and play. Because mobile games are still new and unavoidably disruptive—to the culture and business of games as well as play practices—reactions to mobile games and platforms can reveal how gaming's field is shaped by ongoing struggles among its participants.

Because this chapter is concerned with enthusiasts' struggles over the value of games, the data analysed here is coverage of mobile games in feature articles published by the enthusiast websites *Eurogamer*, *Gamespot*, *Polygon*, and *GamesIndustry.biz*. The mainstream newspapers collected for this study contain some coverage of mobile games, but the coverage has quite different characteristics compared with the enthusiast websites. Most newspapers publish occasional reviews of mobile games along with some financial stories about the larger mobile game companies such as King and Zynga, but the status of mobile as a platform for games is largely uncontested. By contrast, in the enthusiast websites mobile games are a site of impassioned contestation and judgment regarding the value and authenticity of games, platforms, companies, and players. The discursive construction of mobile games is therefore important to analyse, as these conflicts have significant consequences for who and what is considered to 'belong' and have value. In this way, the chapter further illuminates the struggles occurring in gaming's field to establish 'legitimate' forms of games and play.

In the enthusiast websites analysed in this chapter, the discursive construction of mobile games is centred around a conflict over the commercialisation and creativity of games. The chapter begins by exploring this conflict and establishes that mobile games are

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financial terms, market research firm Newzoo reported global mobile game revenue in 2013 at US$17.6 billion, around 23 per cent of total game revenue (Newzoo 2014). By 2018, Newzoo had mobile game revenue at $63.2 billion, or 47 per cent of the total global game market (Newzoo 2019). By this measure, at least, mobile games have claimed an increasingly larger portion of the digital game market as a whole.

positioned at the heteronomous pole of gaming's field due to the apparent commercial motives of dominant companies in the mobile game industry. The 'free-to-play' business model, which is highly criticised in these websites, is central to the construction of mobile games as low-quality as a result of being compromised by commercial interests. This positions mobile games as inferior to more established and legitimised game platforms such as consoles and PC. After analysing this positioning of mobile games, the chapter considers the discursive construction of mobile game players, who are presented as exploited by commercially-driven companies, and unable to appreciate high-quality games. This discursive gatekeeping of 'authentic' games, platforms, companies, and players is encapsulated in the distinct—and distinctly gendered—categories of 'casual' and 'core', which are used in these publications to maintain a value hierarchy in gaming's field. This hierarchy continues to marginalise mobile games and players in relation to the autonomous values promoted by these enthusiast publications.

Commerce and creativity: mobile games at the heteronomous pole

It is immediately apparent that coverage of mobile games in the enthusiast websites' feature articles is quite different from coverage of other kinds of games. The feature articles that comprise the enthusiast website data corpus contain articles discussing and critiquing mobile as a game platform, and much of this coverage is overtly negative. Headlines in these publications announce that 'mobile is burning' (*Polygon*, 9 May 2014), decry 'the murky world of [mobile] app cloning' (*Eurogamer*, 14 Feb 2014), and ask 'is free-to-play [a widespread business model used in mobile games] going to take over consoles and PC?' (*Gamespot*, 12 Apr 2014). These headlines reveal clear anxieties about mobile as a game platform. Some of this coverage is so critical of the mobile game industry and design practices that mobile games are described as 'a joke' (*Eurogamer*, 8 Feb 2014) and 'a real tragedy' (*Eurogamer*, 3 May 2014). This section explores the reasons for this negative coverage and finds that mobile games, as well as major mobile game developers, are constructed as driven by economic motives rather than an interest in good game design (as this is defined by writers for these enthusiast publications). As a result, these publications position mobile games at the heteronomous

pole of gaming's field, and thus in opposition to the autonomous values of the field these publications seek to establish. In fact, mobile games are at times presented as a threat to other, more highly-valued games and platforms. Before exploring these enthusiast discourses of mobile games in more detail, a look at the frequency of mobile game coverage in the enthusiast websites is itself revealing. For most of these websites, mobile games are not a central interest. As Table 6.1 below outlines, mobile games account for a small minority of coverage in *Polygon*, *Eurogamer*, and *Gamespot*. The more business-focused *GamesIndustry.biz* has much more frequent coverage of mobile games than the other websites, reflecting the rapid growth of the mobile game industry.

Table 6.1 Leximancer query results for 'mobile' for each enthusiast game website

Website	Total search results for 'mobile'	Articles mentioning 'mobile'	% of articles mentioning 'mobile'
Polygon	90	27	13%
Eurogamer	75	32	10%
Gamespot	45	22	7%
GamesIndustry.biz	330	106	44%

Mobile games feature frequently in the financial and business discourses that dominate the *GamesIndustry.biz* coverage. In the other websites, which are more concerned with game content and culture, mobile games feature much less frequently. It is not the case that mobile games are simply ignored by these latter websites; both *Polygon* and *Eurogamer* feature iOS and Android categories on their websites alongside home consoles, PC, and dedicated handheld systems. *Gamespot* does not have a specific mobile category, which helps to explain the comparatively low search results above. But in general, mobile games do not command as much interest on these player- and consumer-focused websites as the mobile industry's economic success and huge player numbers might appear to warrant. Established gaming cultures have been built around older platforms, particularly home consoles and PCs, and these publications are aimed

at readers who are primarily part of those cultures[33]. The vast majority of feature article content in *Gamespot*, *Eurogamer*, and *Polygon* concerns home console platforms—primarily the most recent releases at this time, the Xbox One, PlayStation 4, and Wii U—as well as PC. *GamesIndustry.biz* has much more extensive coverage of mobile; however, as will be discussed below, this publication shares the same anxieties as the other publications about mobile presenting a threat to other game platforms.

In this coverage, the mobile game industry is viewed in a very negative light. There are two recurring criticisms that together construct the mobile game industry as driven by an economic logic rather than an interest in good game design or a respect for games as a medium. Firstly, the mobile platform is described as dominated by a small number of big companies, such as King (*Candy Crush Saga*), which earn the bulk of revenue from the mobile game market. For example, a *GamesIndustry.biz* writer (18 Dec 2013) tempers the strong growth of mobile games with a concern that this growth 'seems to be increasingly accounted for by the companies already at the top of the heap', and questions whether this situation is sustainable. It is not only the dominance of these companies that causes concern, but also the perception of their economic priorities, which is evident in this comparison between King and Zynga (developer of *FarmVille* (Zynga 2009) and many other mobile and Facebook games):

- 'The two companies [King and Zynga] are, in my mind, very similar both in culture and in approach. Neither was founded out of any attachment to games as a medium, a culture or an artform; both are simply entrepreneurial vehicles to exploit a potential market, and as such, it's to be expected that both would struggle to adapt and succeed at points where they encounter obstacles that can only be surmounted by creativity rather than by management bullet points or business model refinement' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 21 Feb 2014).

[33] There are numerous websites dedicated to mobile game coverage, including *Touch Arcade*, *Droid Gamers*, and *Pocket Gamer*.

Both King and Zynga are depicted as driven purely by business concerns rather than a desire to make high-quality games, with 'creativity' directly contrasted with the economic logic of 'exploiting' the market.

The second major criticism regarding the mobile game industry is that the market has been sullied by an abundance of low-quality games and 'clones'—copies of successful games that are produced quickly to capitalise on their popularity. According to this criticism, whenever a mobile game is successful, 'dozens of clones aren't far behind' (*Eurogamer*, 14 Feb 2014), and so these clones are 'choking app stores' (*Polygon*, 23 May 2014). A *Eurogamer* writer (3 May 2014) describes good games as 'buried by an endless deluge of miserable clones and cash-grabs', and 'smothered with each new dump-truck of *Flappy Bird* [dotGears 2013] knock-offs that backs up to their marketplaces everyday'. This metaphor of a dump-truck is intended to draw a comparison to Atari's dumping of excess cartridges of its game *ET* (Atari 1982) in the New Mexico desert in the 1980s, an event the writer describes earlier in the article[34]. The mobile game market is thus constructed as dominated by trash, a situation the writer describes as 'a real tragedy' (*Eurogamer*, 3 May 2014). Importantly, these repeated criticisms about the dominance of large companies and the prevalence of low-quality games on app stores are not simply levelled at individual games and companies, but instead describe the state of the mobile game industry. As a result, 'mobile games' as a discursive category comes to be defined in these negative ways.

From this scenario emerges the plight of small independent mobile developers who, in contrast to the dominant companies, are depicted as caring about making high-quality games but struggling to be noticed by potential players. For example, a *GamesIndustry.biz* article (8 May 2014) quotes an independent game developer who believes releasing a mobile game is risky for small developers because the market is dominated by big companies, and the games that are successful end up being cloned:

[34] These cartridges had just been excavated a week prior to this article's publication, attracting news coverage in enthusiast and mainstream publications.

- '"I think mobile is mainly geared toward the multimillion dollar corporations, the Zyngas and stuff, which can probably put 10 times the amount into marketing that they put into the product itself," Teddy said. "I know there are a couple games like *Flappy Bird* or *Threes* [Sirvo 2014] which become successful, but even in those cases, it feels like a majority of the time, because they're so simple, you're just going to get ripped off and somebody else is going to make the money you needed"' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 8 May 2014).

This developer had previously released two mobile games, which 'flopped', then released a highly-regarded game, *Rogue Legacy* (Cellar Door Games 2013), on PC and consoles. The developer fears that the PC market will have the same problems as mobile if the main distribution platform, Steam, is not curated to keep out low-quality games. Another independent developer—primarily of PC and console games but also some mobile titles—describes the problem with the mobile market in similar but blunter terms:

- '"[S]ome of the games are brilliant—very simple, very casual, but amazingly good—but basically most of the games there are not good … The worst games on mobile phones are so bad that they would never pass the minimum requirements from Sony and Microsoft"' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 4 Dec 2013).

These developers hold console and PC games to be generally of a higher quality than what is found on mobile, and this sentiment appears strongly and consistently in the enthusiast websites. These contrasting constructions of different game platforms reveal how these publications position them in gaming's field according to the forms of value constructed and reproduced by these publications. A contrast is drawn between independent developers driven by a desire to make high-quality games, and other, dominant operators in the mobile market who are depicted as only interested in making money, whether they are large companies like King or smaller developers pushing out low-quality 'clones and cash-grabs'. The authenticity of smaller developers is further established by personalising them as individuals, as in the examples above where they are directly quoted. By contrast, developers of devalued mobiles games are generally

impersonalised by identifying them by company name, such as King or Zynga, or the names of the games they produce.

These contrasting representations of games, platforms, and companies can be understood in terms of the struggle for autonomy in gaming's field. Mobile games made by independent developers are given an authenticity by these publications on account of the developers' apparent interest in making high-quality games and disinterest in economic motives. In contrast, large mobile developers such as King as constructed as driven by economic interests at the expense of game quality. Markers of quality are certainly not associated with a 'deluge' of clones, nor with the output of major mobile game companies such as King. Because the mobile game industry is depicted as dominated by these large developers and inundated with low-quality 'clones', mobile games as a discursive category are thereby positioned at the heteronomous pole of the field. They are constructed as not only devoid of the field's autonomous values reproduced by these publications—namely an interest in well-designed games made by passionate developers—but even as a threat to them. At the centre of these anxieties about mobile games lies the free-to-play business model, which is so contentious and attracts so much commentary in these websites that it must be explored in detail.

The 'threat' of free-to-play

The free-to-play business model (often stylised F2P, and also referred to as 'freemium') is not unique to mobile games; there are many examples of console and PC games that also use the model. However, mobile games and the free-to-play business model are inextricably linked in these websites, to the point that free-to-play partly constitutes the construction of 'mobile games'. This business model is the major focal point of criticisms of mobile games, prompting significant coverage in all four websites, almost all of it critical. However, while the use of this business model for mobile games is almost always viewed negatively, when the model is discussed in relation to other game platforms, the coverage of free-to-play is highly ambivalent. Some writers defend the model as something that *can* be implemented well, often pointing to its implementation on other, non-mobile platforms. The model itself is 'not the problem' according to a

Eurogamer writer (3 May 2014), while a *GamesIndustry.biz* writer states that free-to-play 'is a perfectly valid model for many types of game' (25 Apr 2014). A *Gamespot* article (12 Apr 2014) even declares excitement at the prospect of more free-to-play games—but another article published a week later warns of 'the dangers of free-to-play' (*Gamespot*, 18 Apr 2014). A lengthy feature article in *Polygon* (3 Apr 2014) raises concerns about the ethics of free-to-play mobile games aimed at children, while an opinion piece published a week later by a game developer argues that criticism of free-to-play is driven by 'snobbery and fear' (*Polygon*, 9 Apr 2014). Clearly the use of free-to-play by the mobile game industry is a contentious issue, with various and often oppositional opinions expressed in these websites.

The reason why free-to-play is so contentious—in these publications and more widely among many game players as well as among game developers (Phillips 2016)—is because it is seen as manipulative and exploitative. Free-to-play games cost nothing to download and play, but developers implement other means of encouraging players to spend money, including offering 'microtransactions' to purchase in-game items. The sale of these virtual items has attracted media coverage in recent years, with concerns raised about the ease with which children can purchase items, sometimes resulting in large bills. This issue of children's purchases of in-game items is raised in *Polygon* (3 Apr 2014) as well as in the two UK newspapers (*Daily Mail*, 3 Jun 2014; *The Sun*, 16 Feb 2014). Microtransactions may involve the sale of cosmetic items to allow players to customise game characters, while other items are generally considered more objectionable, such as offering players a way to remove annoying blocks to progression. Players may be able to purchase the ability to perform more in-game actions instead of needing to wait hours to continue playing. Game designers may therefore have an incentive to get players engaged and invested in a game, only to block further play behind a paywall. Players may also be able to buy in-game items that make overcoming obstacles easier, a practice that some game players disparagingly refer to as 'pay-to-win'. In fact, Carter and Björk (2016) found that many players of *Candy Crush Saga* (King 2012) consider buying these in-game 'power-ups' to be a form of cheating. These kinds of approaches to game design and monetisation is what is associated so strongly with mobile games in these publications' coverage.

An example of these objections to free-to-play is a *Gamespot* article (18 Apr 2014) which criticises the mobile game *Trials Frontier* (RedLynx 2014) for its implementation of time barriers. Players must either wait long periods before they can keep playing or pay money to avoid the wait. This is the game that prompted the warning about 'the dangers of free-to-play' mentioned above. Another *Gamespot* article (28 Feb 2014) raises concerns that microtransactions—which the author calls a 'threat'—may be added to the Xbox game *Plants vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare* (PopCap Games 2014). This particular game is not free-to-play but contains some similar mechanics, including a system of 'unlocking' new characters. The author fears microtransactions may be added so players can pay money to skip the frustration caused by locked content. To lend weight to these fears, the author points to the free-to-play mobile game *Plants vs. Zombies 2* (PopCap Games 2013), which she argues is 'designed to not be fun' in order to make players spend money to avoid the 'grind' of replaying levels to earn in-game currency. The contrast established here between the business model and good game design is also present in the *Polygon* article about children's mobile game play (3 Apr 2014), in which a developer of children's games states that designing a game to encourage players to spend money 'is intrinsically different from trying to make something that children will love'. Likewise, a *GamesIndustry.biz* article (7 Feb 2014) states that, when implementing the free-to-play model, 'designers need to make sure they're not compromising the fun of the game'. The apparently deliberate frustrations inflicted on players is considered bad design justified only by economic interests. The business model is presented as harmful to, if not fundamentally incompatible with, the 'fun' experience of a good-quality game.

The above examples are all highly critical of free-to-play, but these publications' ambivalence towards the business model becomes evident when they discuss it in the context of PC games. Differences between game platforms are an important factor in the construction of free-to-play, with a clear distinction drawn between mobile and PC. It is in these contrasts between platforms that the gatekeeping of authenticity emerges as a key feature of mobile game discourse in these websites. In the *Eurogamer* article above, which calls mobile gaming 'a joke', mobile is contrasted with 'the good work being

done on PC', such as with the free-to-play game *Hearthstone*[35] (Blizzard Entertainment 2014), which the author feels is a good implementation of the business model. Good examples of free-to-play are 'usually on PC' and are characterised by 'creative intent and respect for their potential audience' (*Eurogamer*, 8 Feb 2014). A *Gamespot* article (12 Apr 2014) similarly contrasts mobile with PC: 'Titles such as *Path of Exile* [Grinding Gear Games 2013], *League of Legends* [Riot Games 2009], *Hawken* [Adhesive Games 2012], and *Hearthstone* are proving free games can be fun and fair on the PC'. In the same vein, a *GamesIndustry.biz* article (21 May 2014) also points to 'shining examples of free-to-play on PC', citing *League of Legends*, *Dota 2* (Valve 2013), *World of Tanks* (Wargaming 2010), and 'most MMORPGs'.

The case of *Dungeon Keeper* (Mythic Entertainment 2014), a mobile game that received highly critical coverage following its January 2014 release, illustrates the contestation over free-to-play and the authenticity of games, platforms, and developers. A *Gamespot* article (28 Feb 2014) calls *Dungeon Keeper* 'one of the most egregious examples of microtransaction abuse' for requiring players to pay to avoid frustration. Reacting to the game's implementation of free-to-play, *Eurogamer*'s editor-in-chief rails against the 'psychological bag of tricks' employed by some mobile game developers, and argues that for some companies monetising players 'is more important than the games' (*Eurogamer*, 8 Feb 2014). The writer contrasts the desire to monetise players with the creative side of game development and argues that in many mobile games the two are in conflict:

- 'When your free-to-play game is all economy mechanics rather than game mechanics, when your game is all business design rather than game design, you're not actually making a game – you're constructing a scam, whether you realise it or not. If you're doing it knowingly, you're just a high-tech gangster' (*Eurogamer*, 8 Feb 2014).

[35] At the time of the *Eurogamer* article's publication, *Hearthstone* was available on PC in its open beta stage and had not yet been released on mobile platforms.

In this way, creative game designers are distinguished from industry figures whose apparent interest is economic profit. This is clear in this *Eurogamer* article about *Dungeon Keeper*, which positions 'economy mechanics' against 'game mechanics', and 'business design' against 'game design'. The author ends by imploring console developers to '[r]eject the ways of the scammers. Be a game developer.' According to this formulation, being an *authentic* game developer means designing games 'with creative intent and respect for their potential audience'.

While this criticism of *Dungeon Keeper* specifically relates to the free-to-play business model implemented in the game, *Eurogamer*'s editor-in-chief uses this game as an example to argue that 'mobile gaming is a joke'. While not all mobile games are free-to-play, and not all free-to-play games are mobile, the two terms are so intertwined that they almost constitute each other in the coverage of mobile. Again, it is 'mobile games' as a discursive category that is criticised in this article on the basis that the mobile platform is considered so compromised by the dominance of free-to-play. Considering these websites' distinctly different treatment of free-to-play depending on the game platform, it is significant that the *Dungeon Keeper* franchise began in the late 1990s as a highly-regarded series of PC strategy games[36], as another *GamesIndustry.biz* article makes clear:

- '[I]f you were a PC gamer in the 1990s, I think it's fair to generalise and say you're probably firmly in the camp that by and large dislikes microtransactions and considers F2P in general with suspicion' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 7 Feb 2014).

This writer argues that as a mobile free-to-play game *Dungeon Keeper* is simply 'mediocre', but as part of a beloved PC game franchise 'it's a disastrous, idiotic travesty of a thing'. The game is described as a disastrous travesty, it appears, because it has brought a PC game franchise down to the level of mobile games. Another

[36] The original *Dungeon Keeper* (Bullfrog Productions 1997) was designed by Peter Molyneux, who in an interview with *Eurogamer* (1 Apr 2014) criticised the implementation of free-to-play in the mobile game (which he did not work on).

GamesIndustry.biz article (4 Dec 2013) suggests that these platforms' audiences have different standards: 'the demanding nature of the core gaming audience has pushed free-to-play behemoths like [PC games] *League of Legends* and *Dota 2* to ever higher standards of excellence'. PC games are considered to be of a higher quality than mobile games, thanks in part to a more discerning audience. An extra degree of authenticity is afforded to 'the core gaming audience'—a category that often appears in *GamesIndustry.biz* in particular—as these players are deemed to be more knowledgeable about, and demanding of, high quality games. This construction of distinct game audiences for mobile and other platforms is discussed in detail later in the chapter.

Coverage of *Dungeon Keeper* is indicative of how these websites depict the free-to-play business model as a threat looming over other platforms. These other platforms include the Xbox and PlayStation consoles, as indicated by headlines such as 'Console developers need to look at *Dungeon Keeper* and learn' (*Eurogamer*, 8 Feb 2014), and 'Is free-to-play going to take over consoles and PC?' (*Gamespot*, 12 Apr 2014). Contributors to these articles share a desire for 'premium' paid games to survive to avoid the problems associated with free-to-play. It is not the case, then, that free-to-play is met with universal derision and hostility. Rather, coverage in these publications is ambivalent about free-to-play in general, but highly critical of it in the context of mobile games. The model is at least tolerated on PC, where it is less common and where some highly regarded free-to-play games operate. The negative coverage of free-to-play in mobile games is a result of the model's apparent dominance; however, the negative reaction to this dominance shows that the model itself is considered inferior to a 'premium', upfront payment model. The possibility of free-to-play becoming more common on other platforms is clearly considered a threat to good game design and the play experience. Because mobile is seen as so dominated by this business model, mobile gaming as an entire category is constructed as exploitative and shallow, corrupted by the pursuit of money at the expense of game quality.

The distinct poles of gaming's field emerge particularly clearly around this issue of free-to-play and microtransactions, with mobile games defined by profit motives and thereby positioned at the heteronomous pole of the field. This places mobile games in

opposition to the creative work of game designers who are positioned at the autonomous pole due to their apparent motivation to make a high-quality game rather than simply earn money. Because the coverage of mobile games is so dominated by negative criticism of the free-to-play business model, the mobile game industry in general is constructed as uncreative and driven only by profits. As a result, the positioning of mobile games sets them against the ongoing struggle for autonomy in gaming's field. This argument is made quite directly by a designer from mobile game company Fireproof, developer of *The Room* series (Fireproof Games 2012), which releases games at a 'premium' price point (about $5). This designer is very much opposed to free-to-play and considers it harmful to more worthy—which is to say, autonomous—goals of game design:

- 'From investment to publishing to developers to press, the mobile universe is hostile to the creative urge, the high standards and the hunt to find new gaming territory that is required to grow gaming as a meaningful cultural space on any platform … Our ability to communicate to, reach and inspire the people that we make things for is the foundation for everything any artist or craftsperson ever produced' (*Polygon*, 9 May 2014).

An artistic discourse of the sort discussed in Chapter 5 is used here to value the work of game designers, and notably he suggests that developers make games *for* players rather than to make money. For this developer, the most popular mobile games are not artistically valuable. He refers to the top mobile revenue earners as 'ten cute grinding games that are clones of each other', and argues that free-to-play monetisation runs counter to making games culturally meaningful. This is a sentiment largely shared across the coverage of mobile games in these websites. Criticism of mobile games, more than anything else, is motivated by a discomfort with just how profit-focused the mobile game industry is considered to be. The struggle for the field's autonomy from economic measures of success is therefore a central tension in the construction of mobile games in the enthusiast websites. The dichotomy of creativity and commercialisation, centred in particular around the contentious free-to-play model, is a major structuring feature of mobile game discourse in enthusiast websites. This dichotomy is a central aspect of the value hierarchy formed in these websites' coverage,

according to which games, platforms, and developers are positioned in relation to each other in gaming's field. The motives of dominant companies in the mobile game industry are constructed as uncreative and commercialised, and this devalues mobile games as a category. In addition to this devaluing of mobile games and companies, another significant aspect of this coverage is how mobile game players are positioned in relation to other players, as the next section explores.

Addiction and the passive mobile game player

As discussed above, a major reason given for the strong criticisms of the free-to-play model is that, in order to generate revenue, a game is 'designed to not be fun' (*Gamespot*, 28 Feb 2014) so that players will spend money to avoid annoyances. The consequence of constructing free-to-play as an exploitative business model is that mobile game players are depicted as passive and addicted players at the mercy of profit-driven developers. This is demonstrated in the following quote from an interview with the creator of a mobile game design tool:

- 'There's quite a lot of games out there that are literally designed by teams of psychologists sitting in a room saying "we can't implant electrodes into the brains of consumer's [sic] and get them to press a button to stimulate pleasure centres but we can almost do that by creating a game that's so addictive that we get money off them". I don't think that it's good business. It's not a good user experience. In the long run it doesn't work' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 9 Apr 2014).

The familiar contrast between commerce and creativity is again at work here in the suggestion that games should be made by creative designers whose goal is to provide a 'good experience' to players, not by psychologists whose goal is to 'get money off' players. The idea that mobile games are made to exploit player psychology appears numerous times in the website coverage, as in the *Eurogamer* editor-in-chief's criticism of the 'psychological bag of tricks' used by 'conmen sloshing around mobile development' (*Eurogamer*, 8 Feb 2014). Another writer in *GamesIndustry.biz* (3 Dec 2013) argues that mobile games are 'suffering from' metrics-driven design practices,

which are concerned with 'maximizing revenue by tweaking the psychology of game players'. For this writer, developers who are not primarily concerned with making a fun game should 'be in some other business'. The relationship between the game and the player is thus an important feature and consequence of this coverage of mobile games: a good, creative game *offers* the player enjoyment, while a bad, exploitative game *forces* or *tricks* the player into particular actions—ultimately into spending money. In this way, mobile games are depicted as antagonistic towards their players. The suggestion that overly-commercialised mobile games manipulate players further shapes the construction of mobile game players as passive subjects.

The role of 'addiction' is a key factor in these representations, as an 'addicted' player tends to be depicted as passive and, especially in the case of mobile games, manipulated. For example, a *Eurogamer* article (14 Apr 2014) about *Candy Crush Saga* developer King states that '[w]hat King does well … is make the kind of sticky, addictive casual game that consumes commutes, evenings and entire weekends'. The common discourse of game play, of players controlling the game, is inverted; instead, King's games are given power over players in that they have the ability to devour our time. This befits a discourse of addiction, directly invoked in this description of King's games, wherein the source of the addiction has power over the addict. If the player has anything to show for spending an 'entire weekend' on *Candy Crush Saga*, it is not evident from the article. Passive, addicted, manipulated mobile game players are set against the active, engaged players of legitimised games (primarily on console and PC), reinforcing the notion that the latter are a more discerning audience better able to appreciate high-quality, 'authentic' games. The ability of games to consume a player's time is certainly not unique to mobile games; however, as with the critiques of the free-to-play model, addiction is treated differently depending on the game platform in question. Chapter 3 noted that addictiveness, which is the focus of anxieties in newspaper coverage, is an ambivalent concept in enthusiast game discourse, as it has been since the 1980s (Kirkpatrick 2013). When enthusiast writers describe 'some level of a psychologically crippling addiction' involved in playing *Dota 2* for 500 hours (*Gamespot*, 18 Dec 2013) or describe *World of Warcraft* as 'too addictive' (*Gamespot*, 3 Mar 2014), this is in the context of these PC games being high-quality; *Dota 2* was even the writer's 'game of the year'. But this is very rarely the case in coverage of

mobile games, in which addiction instead forms part of the construction of these games as psychologically exploitative and designed to extract money from players.

An additional example serves to crystallise these critiques of mobile game design, addiction, and exploitation. A *Eurogamer* article (5 Jun 2014) about the then popular mobile game *Make It Rain* (Space Inch 2014) uses this game to express a concern about the meaning and value of digital games. *Make It Rain* involves swiping the screen to send monetary notes flying, and the player's goal is simply to keep increasing the amount of money they have flicked away in this fashion. While the game may appear to satirise capitalist indulgences, the author dismisses any satirical potential on the basis that the game includes advertisements for actual financial companies from which the developer makes real money. Instead, the author finds playing the game to be a 'vacuous achievement' that exposes 'the hollow heart of some video games':

- 'The most wounding criticism that can be levelled at the video game medium is not the one that has filled the headlines through the years—the one about how games can inspire violence or turn good kids bad. It is, rather, that games give humans a sense of accomplishment that's so chemically authentic it can distract us from true accomplishment. What great works have gone unmade, great discoveries gone undiscovered, great lives unlived because of the opiate of the video game, with its potent imitations of achievement?' (*Eurogamer*, 5 Jun 2014)

'True' achievement outside of games is contrasted with the inauthenticity of achievements within them, revealing anxieties about the relevance and applicability of games to other areas of life. If achievements in games are not 'true' or authentic, and not transferable to other human affairs, the value of digital play is called into question. The spectre of wastefulness looms in the suggestion that playing games, in the manner of a drug, keeps people from more important pursuits. The writer's description of a 'chemically authentic' but ultimately false sense of achievement creates a sense of games manipulating players, and his description of the game as a 'financial Skinner box' makes this criticism of psychological manipulation overt. Significantly, it is a

mobile game requiring the simplest of player actions that prompts these anxieties. The writer describes how he 'sheepishly' showed the game to his young daughter whose confused reaction made him realise the game is not actually fun. The importance of fun becomes evident again; had the game met that key criterion, playing it to pass the time would not, presumably, have prompted an article about this 'wounding criticism' of false accomplishment. But the perceived emptiness of *Make It Rain* stands in stark contrast to what these websites claim as the authentic value of games: their 'creative spirit' (*Eurogamer*, 3 May 2014), their ability to 'reach and inspire' players (*Polygon*, 9 May 2014), their 'respect for their potential audience' (*Eurogamer*, 8 Feb 2014), and their 'elusive and magical' goal of fun gameplay (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 3 Dec 2013). These are the values deemed to be lacking in mobile games, and consequently mobile game players are depicted as unable to appreciate these qualities. They are instead constructed as passive and manipulated by exploitative design practices.

Casual and core: the exclusionary value hierarchy

This chapter has thus far analysed constructions of mobile games and players, noting that mobile games are presented as uncreative and commercialised, with players who are at the mercy of exploitative design practices. This section discusses how these constructions result in the perpetuation of distinct discursive categories for mobile games and their players as against other game platforms such as consoles and PC. The category of 'casual' games and players is most associated with mobile games in these websites, while 'core' and 'hardcore' are associated with consoles and PC[37]. These categories, which have gained a great deal of traction over the years among game developers, marketers, and journalists, are often used directly by these publications, or

[37] Chess and Paul (2018) note that while the terms 'casual' and 'hardcore' stretch back to the 1990s, they seemed to stabilise and become more common around 2008 (notably around the same time that smartphones were widely adopted and Facebook games became prominent). These authors also note the association of 'casual' with mobile devices and 'hardcore' with console and PC. Core and hardcore are sometimes used interchangeably, but the latter tends to suggest an even greater or more intense dedication to games than the former.

are otherwise reinforced through the distinctions drawn between games and platforms as outlined in this chapter. The effect of using these categories is more than simply constructing differences. Bound up with these categories are value judgments about the authenticity and belonging of 'casual' and 'hard/core' games and players. These widely-read and influential publications tend to address a 'core' audience with a preference for console and PC games, and this inevitably results in the perpetuation of a value hierarchy in gaming's field, according to which 'core' games are positioned as more authentic and valuable than 'casual' ones. Likewise, 'core' game players are constructed as more knowledgeable about games, and therefore more 'at home' within enthusiast game communities and discourses than 'casual' players are. This section discusses the construction and consequences of this value hierarchy.

The way these publications address readers assumes their tastes centre on console and PC games rather than mobile, and this is quite overt at times. The following examples from *Eurogamer* and *Gamespot* show instances of pronouns used to reinforce an 'us and them' distinction between distinct game audiences (underlining added):

- 'They [PC gamers] feel that no game on touch is worth looking at. That's because <u>us gamers</u> have been abused by Facebook gaming and mobile gaming for so long' (*Eurogamer*, 1 Apr 2014, quoting game designer Peter Molyneux explaining his decision to release his game, *Godus* (22Cans 2013), on mobile).
- '[Mobile games] *Candy Crush Saga* and *Flappy Bird* aren't <u>our</u> games—they aren't for the hardcore' (*Gamespot*, 10 Feb 2014)
- '[T]he people enjoying mobile games are a different audience entirely that extends beyond what <u>we</u> consider gaming' (*Gamespot*, 5 Apr 2014).
- 'Traditional gaming—by which I mean the sort that <u>you and I</u> enjoy, that requires a games console or good computer to participate in—doesn't have the hegemony it used to, but it's still a big and vivid business … You can't get the same experience from a mobile or an Amazon Fire [tablet]' (*Eurogamer*, 17 May 2014).

The devaluing of mobile game play is particularly strong in these last two quotes; playing mobile games is not even considered 'gaming' according to these writers. Articles in *Polygon* do not feature this same direct address of readers as enthusiasts who enjoy 'traditional gaming' rather than mobile games. However, *Polygon* is highly critical of the mobile game industry in a number of ways outlined earlier in this chapter, particularly the commercialisation of the mobile game industry and its supposed lack of creativity. *GamesIndustry.biz* writers also do not generally align themselves solely with this 'traditional gaming' audience, as in the excerpts above. However, *GamesIndustry.biz* frequently uses the 'core gamer' category in its articles and positions it against mobile game players, which has the effect of reinforcing differences between these audiences. This is illustrated by the excerpts below from *GamesIndustry.biz*; the first two include quotes from mobile game developers seeking to appeal to a core audience, while the third is a journalist discussing the preferences of core gamers:

- '[W]e are focusing on creating AAA quality games tailored to the pursuits and expectations of the core gamer, a community that we feel hasn't been properly embraced in mobile. Since we're gamers ourselves, it's important for us to not only develop titles that get the community excited, but games that we actually want to play as well' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 4 Jun 2014).
- 'Convincing hardcore gamers that there's a game for them on the tablets they sneer at will be a challenge, and Super Evil [a mobile game company] is well aware of the difficulty level. "Hard core players are reticent to change, they are in love with the platforms they are already playing on …" Daly said' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 5 Jun 2014).
- 'Few core gamers welcome sweeping predictions that we'll all be gaming on mobile phones in the not-too-distant future, leading to a feeling that core gaming needs something new, big and exciting to justify the high costs and bulky, whirring boxes' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 21 Mar 2014).

GamesIndustry.biz in particular uses 'core' to refer to players who buy and play games regularly and are highly knowledgeable about games—including knowledge about what games are available, what is considered a 'good' game, and so on. In this publication, the term mainly appears as part of a marketing discourse to identify a game's target

audience. The ‘core gamer’ label as it is used by *GamesIndustry.biz* reinforces a clear distinction between mobile and the more traditional console and PC platforms.

Notably, the excerpts above describe the ‘core’ as an audience that needs to be courted by developers. There are no cases of the reverse scenario of mobile game players needing to be convinced to ‘embrace’ core games. This suggests that the legitimacy of the ‘core’ is accepted and assumed, and it is the mobile game industry that should make adjustments to appeal to this audience. The ‘core’ is thus positioned as not just different from but superior to ‘casual’. The hard/core audience is invoked very similarly in the following excerpt from a *Eurogamer* interview with the ‘games guru’ at King, developer of *Candy Crush Saga*:

- ‘[W]hat’s it going to take for King to be embraced by the core? “A lot of the people internally are hardcore gamers, traditionally, and I think that many hardcore gamers enjoy the fact that their mothers or their girlfriend or people around them are starting to play this game,” says Palm’ (*Eurogamer*, 14 Apr 2014).

In addition to maintaining the distinction between ‘hardcore gamers’ and players of King’s games, this quote also highlights one of the major implications of the coverage of mobile games in these publications, namely the reinforcement of gendered player stereotypes. Here, even the game’s developer casts *Candy Crush Saga* players as female (mothers and girlfriends) and implies the hardcore gamer is male. While the implication of this quote could be that mobile players might transition to ‘core’ games, this is not directly stated; instead, the ‘mothers’ and ‘girlfriends’ are kept at a distance, as an ‘othered’ audience outside the hard/core.

This gendered characterisation of the audience is bound up with the association of mobile titles with a ‘casual’ style of game design. Casual games, typified by the likes of *Candy Crush Saga*, tend to have certain characteristics that distinguish them from more ‘hardcore’ games. Game scholar Jesper Juul (2010, p. 50) outlines five key components of casual game design: these games generally have ‘pleasant’ environments and

emotional resonances; do not require extensive knowledge of game conventions such as control schemes; do not 'punish' the player for failure by requiring them to replay large sections; are generally designed to be playable in short bursts; and give a great deal of positive feedback to players for successfully performing actions. These games have appealed to many people who may have eschewed more 'hardcore' games and game cultures, and in game discourses casual games have therefore been associated with audiences other than the traditional young male gamer. Gender is one of the significant points of difference. Research exploring players of casual games has shown an almost even gender split (Eklund 2016), and yet, as a number of game scholars have outlined, 'casual' game play is typically feminised, whereas 'hardcore' game play has traditionally been coded as masculine (Chess 2017; Kubic 2012; Soderman 2017; Vanderhoef 2013). This is consistent with a history of popular media forms being articulated as feminine (Huyssen 1986). These popular, feminised media forms tend to be devalued in comparison to more exclusionary, masculine forms of culture. Television, for example, was historically positioned as a feminine and domestic appliance, and certain television genres such as soap operas were simultaneously feminised and devalued[38] (Newman & Levine 2012).

While it is rare for these publications to overtly associate casual games with female players, as in the above quote from a King employee, the feminisation of casual games and play is reinforced in the way these publications maintain distinctions between core and casual audiences. Readers of *Eurogamer* and *Gamespot* in particular are addressed as dedicated console and PC game players, while mobile players are positioned as the other, an outside audience with different—and generally inferior—tastes, interests, and knowledges. While *GamesIndustry.biz* is aimed at a somewhat different readership with its focus on industry issues and trends, it also maintains the same distinction between core players of traditional console and PC games and casual mobile players. This gendered distinction between core and casual games and players is best illustrated by a *Eurogamer* article on *Candy Crush Saga*. In December 2013, *Eurogamer* ran a series of

[38] Newman and Levine (2012) argue that part of the recent legitimation of television as 'respectable culture' involves the masculinisation of the medium. Gender associations are reversed but still present.

fifteen articles naming the 'games of 2013', each article written by a different contributor announcing their choice. One writer, Ellie Gibson, named the mobile game *Candy Crush Saga* as her 'game of the year', the only mobile game chosen in this series (*Eurogamer*, 24 Dec 2013). This is significant in itself since it is a very rare case of *Candy Crush Saga* appearing in a positive light[39], but the article is also notable for its defensive justification of the choice. Most of the article is spent debunking 'myths' about the game, including that it is merely a 'clone' of other games, that its free-to-play model ends up costing players a lot of money, and that it is only played by 'middle-aged women'. Anticipating a backlash from readers, Gibson ends the article with a 'Christmas wish' that 'everyone is allowed to like different things' and can express their opinion 'without being told they're stupid, or "bias", or talking out of their vaginas'. This last quote casts defenders of *Candy Crush Saga* as female, suggesting that Gibson is very conscious of gendered criticism of the game. On this point, it is also notable that Gibson was one of only two women to contribute to this article series; the other twelve writers were men. Gibson further heads off criticism of her choice of game of the year by saying 'maybe it's not yours, but I'm OK with that'[40]. Here again, readers are addressed as 'core' players who prefer the kind of console and PC games that account for the other fourteen 'games of the year' in this article series. That assumption was justified a few days later with the publication of a 'readers' choice' list of games of the year; of the fifty games on the list, none were mobile games (*Eurogamer*, 31 Dec 2013). This example is therefore a clear demonstration of the significance of gender to these discursive categories of casual and hard/core, and the way these categories are mobilised in the construction of 'authentic' games and platforms.

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[39] *Candy Crush Saga* is much more often viewed as one of the worst offenders in terms of mobile design and business practice; cf. *Gamespot* (12 Apr 2014): 'Games that use unsavory business practices are going to keep expanding, and eventually, you're going to have the same calculated, *Candy Crush*-like experiences readily available on your console.' *Eurogamer* elsewhere describes the game's developer, King, as 'the pantomime villains of the industry' (14 Apr 2014).

[40] Gibson's fear of a backlash was well-founded. Almost all of the 200 reader comments expressed disapproval of the choice, mainly on the basis of the game's free-to-play business model.

In addition to the association of the 'core' audience with the young male 'gamer' identity, this audience is defined by particular tastes and the possession of certain kinds of gaming capital. The overwhelmingly positive coverage of the PlayStation Vita handheld console is an especially clear illustration of how legitimacy and authenticity is afforded to some platforms and their associated players and denied to others. This is a useful comparison because the Vita is also a 'mobile' game device, and yet is otherwise constructed entirely differently from mobile smartphones and tablets. For example, the Vita is described by *Eurogamer* as 'a future cult classic' (1 Feb 2014) and 'criminally underrated' (31 Dec 2013). *Gamespot* calls the Vita 'a remarkable gaming handheld' (19 May 2014). One writer describes his 'love for the Vita' and writes that 'anyone who loves games would adore one' (*Gamespot*, 23 Jan 2014). The Vita is especially associated with 'indie' titles; it has a 'greatest-hits collection of the best independent games out there' (*Gamespot*, 23 Jan 2014), and these indie games give the Vita 'the cool factor' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 16 Dec 2013). Among Vita owners are 'a huge number of devoted core gamers' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 25 Apr 2014), who a developer describes as 'very, very engaged game consumers' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 14 Apr 2014). The PlayStation Vita, then, is associated with a 'core' audience that understands and appreciates high-quality games, especially indie titles produced by relatively small teams without the financial backing of large publishers. This is very different from the association of mobile phones and tablets with a more 'casual' audience, with apparently low-quality games and clones, and with the maligned free-to-play business model. This opposition between platforms is made directly by *GamesIndustry.biz* (25 Apr 2014): 'buying a Vita and supporting the developers who work on it has become the default action for gamers who bemoan the rapid rise of F2P [free-to-play] and mobile gaming'. Like mobile, the Vita is portable, but unlike mobile, playing games is the Vita's *raison d'être*. The Vita is an extension of traditional game consoles; it is released by Sony as part of the PlayStation brand, has traditional console-style controls in addition to a touchscreen and can thus support a wide range of games, and its game library includes many titles 'ported' from other game systems[41]. The positive evaluation of the Vita

[41] Commonly-cited examples of high-quality Vita games in these websites include *Spelunky* (Mossmouth 2013), *Hotline Miami* (Dennaton Games 2013), and *Thomas Was Alone* (Bithell 2013), all of which had previously been released on PC.

shows that the articulation of a 'core gamer' audience centres on a preference for certain platforms rather than others, as well as the possession of legitimised gaming capital among this audience, including knowledge of what apparently constitutes a good-quality game[42].

The continued articulation of these 'hard/core' and 'casual' categories is important to interrogate because these publications play an important role in influencing game discourses, establishing expected standards and values, and cultivating game communities. Game cultures and communities are structured around who and what is included and considered legitimate. In addressing some players and not others, and in privileging some games and platforms over others, these publications engage in gatekeeping practices. The result of these constructions of mobile games, developers, and players is a particularly gendered pattern of exclusion in gaming's field, with the feminised space of mobile games positioned, sometimes explicitly, as *not gaming*. In addition to gender, older players may be excluded by these same processes; the construction of mobile audiences in opposition to a youthful male 'core' audience means older players are also positioned as outsiders. Indeed, any players who do not fit neatly into the construction of a core audience, on whatever basis, can be excluded in this way. Kowert, Breuer and Quandt (2017) detail a 'cycle of exclusion and sexism' in games and game culture that works to reinforce gender divides among game players. According to these authors, this cycle includes: socialisation processes, such as the perception that playing games is a male activity; practices within the industry, including the dominance of men in game development roles and gender inequalities in the content of games; and sexist attitudes in game communities. These attitudes come to characterise game cultures and communities, thus reinforcing perceptions that playing games is a male activity, and so the cycle continues. Publications such as those studied here are important contributors to the formation and cultivation of game communities in the way they construct players, games, companies, and platforms. In marginalising mobile platforms, and their associated casual, feminised games and players, these

[42] The coverage of the Vita also shows that criticisms of mobile games have little to do with the relative lack of hardware power compared to high-end consoles or the portable nature of the hardware, as dedicated handheld systems have these things in common with mobile phones and tablets.

publications perpetuate the male dominance of the established 'authentic' gaming culture formed around particular game genres and platforms. The consequences of this can be severe. Game scholars Adrienne Shaw and Shira Chess (2016) argue that the emergence of casual games and the growth of game-playing audiences was a factor in the hatred and anger expressed by gamergaters—enthusiast gamers who felt threatened because cultural and industry changes meant their hobby had expanded beyond its fiercely protected niche. The data for this study was collected just before gamergate erupted, and some of the conditions that contributed to that campaign of abuse—particularly the gatekeeping work performed to reinforce the legitimacy of particular games, platforms, and audiences at the expense of others—is evident from this coverage of mobile games.

Conclusion

This analysis of coverage of mobile games has illuminated struggles over the autonomy of gaming's field in these enthusiast publications. The ongoing work of establishing the field's specific forms of value is evident in the way these publications respond to the increasing prominence of mobile games and the dominant trends in the mobile industry. This chapter has shown that mobile is constructed as almost hopelessly compromised according to the field's internal forms of value sustained by these publications. The mobile game industry is presented as dominated by a small number of large, uncreative companies, and otherwise by a slew of low-quality games and 'clones'. The free-to-play business model is considered pervasive and is held responsible for design practices deemed manipulative and deliberately anti-fun. The most popular and visible mobile games, such as *Candy Crush Saga*, are devalued on the basis that they are perceived as tools for extracting money from players through exploitative design. The mobile designers who are afforded symbolic capital as creative artists working to make high-quality games in this environment are struggling to achieve visibility. All this contributes to 'mobile games' as a discursive category being labelled 'a joke' (*Eurogamer*, 8 Feb 2014) and 'a real tragedy' (*Eurogamer*, 3 May 2014).

Moreover, other platforms more favoured by writers and readers of these publications are considered under threat from these trends. As mobile is devalued in these ways, console and PC games are elevated. The criticisms of mobile games shore up the value claimed for games on other platforms. According to these publications, dominant trends in the mobile space must be avoided in the space of 'authentic' games and play on consoles and PC, where the best, most creative games are to be found. These games are characterised by legitimised forms of value which help to establish the autonomy of gaming's field. The mobile game industry is constructed as an obstacle in the struggle for autonomy by being dominated by games that generate vast amounts of economic capital but which are not, in the view of these websites, of high enough quality. While there are some examples of meritorious mobile games, especially those made by smaller developers, they are cited as exceptions to the otherwise dire state of the mobile game market.

In line with Bourdieu's descriptions of field dynamics, this conflict between creativity and commerce is a central aspect of the construction of mobile games. Chapter 5 noted that the economic value of the game industry is given prominence in the newspaper corpus and is heavily promoted by industry groups. In those broader contexts, the economic capital generated by mobile game companies helps to legitimise games and play according to the logic of the field of power. But as this chapter has shown, in enthusiast publications, which have more of an interest in establishing forms of value specific to the field, economic success is treated very differently. Mobile games and companies that are perceived as more interested in money than the cultural importance of games are considered of less worth than developers who value 'games as a medium, a culture or an artform' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 21 Feb 2014). To value gaming on its own terms as a cultural field requires disavowing economic success as the prime marker of value. Instead, the games that these publications elevate according to the autonomous values of the field are those that are creative, expressive, well-designed, and fun. This is why the free-to-play business model is so central to criticisms of mobile games and so dominant in the coverage of them. Not only is free-to-play depicted as a means of making more money rather than making a better game; it is also seen as actively compromising good game design by interrupting the player or blocking their progress with paywalls. As a *Gamespot* writer put it, *Plants vs Zombies 2* is 'designed to not be

fun' (28 Feb 2014). Writers for these publications evidently feel that dominant trends in the mobile game industry are threatening to what they consider valuable about games.

However, Bourdieu's description of symbolic capital as a misrecognised form of economic or political capital (1993, p. 75) is important here. The legitimised games and platforms covered by these publications are of course commercialised as well, and yet are held to be 'authentic' against the commercialised mobile game industry. Affording symbolic capital to legitimised games and platforms—and to those who understand and enjoy them—requires a disavowal of their own commercialisation. Likewise, the discursive distinction between active and passive players, which appears in the context of exploitative business models and notions of addictiveness, does not stand up to scrutiny given that free-to-play models and 'addictive' gameplay are hardly unique to mobile games. While the same characteristics are present in console and PC games and platforms, it is only mobile games that come to be defined by them in a negative way. Mobile games are constructed as a kind of distillation of games down into elements that are considered of less value, against which the legitimacy of other games and platforms is then affirmed. By maintaining discursive distinctions between platforms, these websites are able to elevate console and PC platforms on the basis that they are not *that* commercialised, not *that* addictive, not *that* exploitative.

The most significant distinction made in the coverage of mobile games, the one which underpins and is maintained by all the others, is the contrast between the categories of 'casual' and 'hard/core'. The devalued casual games associated with mobile platforms are contrasted with legitimised core games on PC and consoles. Because these concepts are also used to label distinct audiences of players, these categories are especially pernicious. Just as casual games are defined in contrast to core games, casual players are defined against core players, leading to the feminisation of casual games and play in contrast to the traditionally male-dominated hard/core. Many games labelled 'casual' are indeed designed to appeal to an audience beyond the core, and Juul (2010) considers these sorts of games responsible for the 'normalisation' of games. But this chapter has shown that the discursive divides maintained by these publications lead to a strong devaluing of mobile games. As a category, 'mobile' is defined in negative terms. The fundamental conflict explored in this chapter is that these publications' attempts to

establish and maintain the autonomous values of gaming's field pointedly exclude the new audiences that would help to grow and diversify games. This tension cannot be resolved for as long as the supposed authenticity of digital games continues to be associated with particular types of games, platforms, and audiences to the exclusion of others. As important participants in gaming's field, enthusiast publications have a key role to play in this process. The following chapter, which analyses the coverage of virtual reality, functions in tandem with this one in that it further explores struggles over autonomy and authenticity. But whereas mobile games are constructed as threatening, virtual reality is presented as the enthusiast's 'dream'.

7 Virtual reality and 'the future' of games

This chapter analyses the coverage of virtual reality in mainstream newspapers and enthusiast game websites, and forms a complement to the preceding chapter on mobile games. On 25 March 2014, Facebook announced that it was acquiring the virtual reality company Oculus VR (henceforth Oculus) for US$2 billion. In August and September 2012, Oculus had used the crowdfunding website Kickstarter to fund development of a virtual reality headset, the Rift. This crowdfunding campaign attracted a great deal of attention among digital game enthusiasts and sparked renewed interest in consumer VR technology. Facebook's acquisition announcement in March 2014 occurred halfway through the data collection period of the present study, and the increased coverage of virtual reality around this time—both in the newspapers and the enthusiast game websites—is fruitful to analyse in the context of this thesis. As a technology that is often described a 'new' gaming platform, virtual reality is invested with desires, hopes, and expectations in the media coverage, and these offer further insight into how digital games are constructed, positioned, and valued[43].

The chapter begins by examining common descriptions of VR in media coverage as a futuristic technology with the potential to deliver the 'dream' of full immersion in virtual environments. The analysis explores how, in the media coverage of Facebook's purchase of Oculus, the VR 'dream' takes the form of technocratic visions of a utopian

[43] While numerous companies were developing VR hardware around this time—including Sony's Morpheus (later named PlayStation VR), Valve and HTC's Vive, and Samsung's Gear VR—this chapter focuses on Oculus, as this was the most high-profile VR company at the time and attracted most of the coverage in both newspapers and game websites.

future. While this future purportedly signalled by VR has much in common with the earlier 1990s VR hype, it is reinvigorated and supported by the expectation of continual technological development. The chapter then looks specifically at how VR is covered in enthusiast game websites, particularly how it is constructed as a game technology with the potential to deliver a gaming 'dream'. The dream of VR gaming is realised discursively through a focus on the potential of the technology, the promise of further technological advancements, and the creativity and passion of VR developers. Ultimately, this section argues that virtual reality represents the (potential) realisation of enthusiasts' desires for full immersion in game worlds, and coverage of VR reproduces forms of value articulated by these publications.

To further explore the positioning of VR by enthusiast publications, the chapter then looks in detail at the effect of Facebook's acquisition of Oculus on the coverage of VR. This event reveals notable, ongoing tensions in gaming's field concerning the perceived authenticity of platforms, games, companies, and developers. Specifically, this section analyses the construction of Oculus as a credible and authentic game technology company, and the comparative lack of authenticity of Facebook. This contestation over authenticity and 'ownership' of VR is located in attempts to establish internal forms of value in gaming's field. Enthusiast publications seek to establish the autonomy of gaming's field around the promise and potential of virtual reality, but these efforts are undermined by the sudden intrusion of Facebook into VR's development. In combination with the previous chapter's analysis of mobile game coverage, the following analysis details how participants in gaming's field position specific platforms, games, and audiences relative to others as they seek to establish forms of value. The dichotomies of 'core' and 'casual', creativity and commercialism, and instrumental and pleasurable play feature in constructions of virtual reality, establishing the enthusiast desire of full immersion in VR game worlds as 'the future' of games, compared to which other forms of games such as mobile are thereby devalued.

The ‘dream’ of immersive media

In her critique of the first wave of virtual reality hype in the 1990s, literary scholar Marie-Laure Ryan notes that the popular attention it attracted was achieved ‘less through a revolutionary computer system than through a grand flourish of rhetoric’ (2001, p. 48). The most enthusiastic VR evangelists presented their visions of how the technology would change people’s lives, transforming our surroundings and ourselves into whatever we wanted. VR would achieve the dream—typified by *Star Trek*’s holodeck—of entering into imaginary fictional worlds. However, the technology of the time could not deliver the experience of total immersion in virtual spaces, falling well short of the bold claims. But the dream, evidently, has remained intact. The most notable aspect of the coverage of virtual reality in this study’s data is how little the rhetoric has changed since the collapse of the 90s hype. In both the newspapers and game websites, virtual reality is frequently described as—at least potentially—able to achieve the ‘dream’ of total immersion, both in games and in other applications:

- ‘Creating an affordable virtual reality device for the mass market has been the holy grail of sorts for game developers and futurists. Now Facebook’s $2-billion purchase of Oculus may bring that dream one step closer to reality’ (*Los Angeles Times*, 28 Mar 2014).
- ‘A wearable gaming controller called the PrioVR consists of sensors to be strapped onto the body to allow users to fully immerse themselves in video games or any other kind of virtual world. Combined with the Oculus Rift virtual reality headset, this is every gamer’s dream’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 Jan 2014).
- ‘For tech fanatics, virtual reality is a long-running dream that has never quite made the leap from *Star Trek* and other science fiction fantasies into a product that ordinary people would buy’ (*New York Times*, 26 Mar 2014).
- ‘It’s been a long time coming, but Sony has finally revealed its take on the great virtual reality dream’ (*Eurogamer*, 21 Mar 2014).

As these quotes indicate, gaming is certainly a touchstone for virtual reality technology, but it is not just in gaming that immersion is considered to be desirable. Articles in both the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* suggest that the goal of immersion is the logical trajectory of all media development:

- '"Now that VR is finally hitting the mainstream and there's this whole revolution behind it, this really becomes the ultimate medium," the 23-year-old [VR developer] said. "I feel like it's the pinnacle of this overarching goal over the last 30, 40 years of making entertainment more and more immersive"' (*Los Angeles Times*, 28 Mar 2014).
- '[V]irtual reality is the natural extension of every major technology we use today—of movies, TV, videoconferencing, the smartphone and the web. It is the ultra-immersive version of all these things, and we'll use it exactly the same ways—to communicate, to learn, and to entertain ourselves and escape' (*New York Times*, 3 Apr 2014).

The belief that full immersion represents 'the end of media history' (Ryan 2001. p. 57) was also present in the 1990s VR hype, and this dream has resurfaced along with the technology. As Ryan notes, this desire for complete immersion demands that the medium 'disappear' and the virtual reality become a fully realised world for the user to enter into, not merely a representation of one. This is the 'dream' that VR is purported to offer, and it is presented as the 'natural' advancement of media technologies. VR developers promote this immersive trajectory, including Oculus CEO Brendan Iribe, who claims that VR 'is going to take off like wildfire' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 20 Jun 2014), employing a metaphor of a natural force to suggest a phenomenon that, in his words, 'you cannot hold back'. Iribe further claims that VR is 'the next generation of computing', and 'the age of 2D monitors' is over (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 13 Jan 2014). The suggestion here is that everyone wants their media experiences to be as immersive as possible, and that more immersion is always desirable. This assumption is very rarely questioned in the media coverage of VR.

The promise of VR as the 'ultimate medium' has been circulating for some time. In the mid-1990s, Biocca, Kim and Levy (1995) wrote that it was 'too early to tell' (p. 13) whether VR technology of the time fit the bill, but they argued that dreams of the 'ultimate display' have accompanied many other media as well, including painting, photography, film, and television (p. 7). VR is heavily invested with lofty hopes of this kind. Media researcher Ken Hillis (1999, pp. 1-2) writes that virtual reality is an example of Western desires to transform space, transcend the body, and merge 'a hyper-individuated modern consciousness into a larger whole'. Technology scholar Langdon Winner (1995, p. 71) similarly notes 'a strong anticipation—even a yearning—that human beings and technical devices will eventually merge'. This notion is the basis of Donna Haraway's influential use of the cyborg[44] as a concept that can overcome inadequate, binary ways of understanding identities, including gender (Haraway 1991). However, while the notion of transcendence of the body often accompanies representations of VR, media scholar Melanie Chan (2014) points out that the user's embodiment in the actual, physical world is still a fundamental part of the experience. Likewise, game scholar Daniel Golding (2019) describes how, rather than the medium 'disappearing', discourses of recent VR technology, specifically the Rift, foreground the operation of the device; thus users' bodies are in fact highly visible and gendered. As with all technologies, VR is not neutral. Social inequalities—in terms of class, gender, age, ethnicity, ability, and so on—still figure in the design and use of VR technology. Sociologist Judy Wajcman (2010) points out that recent feminist analysis of technology has focused on the mutual constitution of technology and society. Gender power relations are materialised in technological artefacts, which in turn affect gender relations. This occurs not only in the design of artefacts, but also in their use (Wajcman 2010, p. 149). Consumer VR, for example, is an expensive technology that presupposes a significant amount of uninterrupted space and time to operate—privileges which are unevenly afforded to potential users. In this recent re-emergence of consumer virtual

[44] A number of game scholars have described digital game play as a cybernetic relationship between player and game (Dovey & Kennedy 2006; Friedman 2006; Galloway 2006; Giddings 2005; Keogh 2018; Lahti 2003; Lister et al. 2009; Owen 2014) and described the player as a posthuman subject (Boulter 2015).

reality, therefore, it is important to question who is advancing and claiming ownership over the 'dream' of VR.

The technologically determined future

While Oculus's Rift headset began as a gaming-focused technology in the 2012 Kickstarter campaign, by 2014 the company was positioning VR as far more wide-reaching. This is especially the case after Facebook acquired Oculus in March 2014. For example, a few weeks before the Facebook acquisition, Oculus founder Palmer Luckey spoke about his goal to 'change humanity' and 'change the world' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 3 Mar 2014). Such lofty goals cannot be quickly achieved, and so this shift from game-changing technology to world-changing one involved an emphasis on the *potential* of the technology. VR was no longer just about fulfilling gamers' dreams, but about an endless variety of possible applications. This shift in the emphasis is notable because, while some of the quotes cited earlier imply that the 'dream' is now realisable, companies like Oculus are quick to note that VR is in its early stages; it is 'going to take off' at some point in the future. If the dream of full immersion has not quite been realised yet, the question that VR advocates needed to answer became: how can the dream be achieved? This section examines how the assurance of technological progression is used to validate the potential of VR.

Because much of the newspaper coverage of VR included statements from Facebook and Oculus following the acquisition, it is best to first consider the press release announcing the purchase (Facebook Newsroom 2014). In the excerpt below, the underlined text marks discursive instances of these companies looking to the future development of the technology, as opposed to its present abilities:

> While the applications for virtual reality technology beyond gaming are in their nascent stages, several industries are already experimenting with the technology, and Facebook plans to extend Oculus' existing advantage in gaming to new verticals, including communications, media and entertainment, education and other areas. Given these broad potential applications, virtual reality technology is a strong candidate to emerge as the next social and communications platform.

> "Mobile is the platform of today, and now we're also getting ready for the platforms of tomorrow," said Facebook founder and CEO, Mark Zuckerberg. "Oculus has the chance to create the most social platform ever, and change the way we work, play and communicate."
>
> "We are excited to work with Mark and the Facebook team to deliver the very best virtual reality platform in the world," said Brendan Iribe, co-founder and CEO of Oculus VR. "We believe virtual reality will be heavily defined by social experiences that connect people in magical, new ways. It is a transformative and disruptive technology, that enables the world to experience the impossible, and it's only just the beginning."

Positioning VR as a communication platform[45] rather than simply a gaming technology is also the main theme of Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook post at the time of the acquisition. Zuckerberg (2014) describes gaming as 'just the start' of VR's applications, then suggests some 'potential uses' of the technology: 'Imagine enjoying a court side seat at a game, studying in a classroom of students and teachers all over the world or consulting with a doctor face-to-face'. Describing VR as 'really a new communication platform', Zuckerberg states that 'we believe this kind of immersive, augmented reality will become a part of daily life for billions of people', and concludes:

> Virtual reality was once the dream of science fiction. But the internet was also once a dream, and so were computers and smartphones. The future is coming and we have a chance to build it together.

Here again, the focus is on what virtual reality will become in the future. At the time of the acquisition, VR had not been developed into a new social and communication platform, but that is what Facebook and Oculus 'have a chance to build' through continued development of the technology.

Emphasising the future potential of virtual reality has the effect of heralding the technology while managing expectations, and this also marks a key difference from the VR rhetoric of previous decades. Ryan (2001, p. 48) notes that virtual reality in the

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[45] Biocca and Levy (1995) also suggested that VR technology in the mid-1990s represented a new emerging communication system.

1990s ‘was presented by the media to the general public as being in a state of perfect implementation’, and the wide gap between the expectation of perfection and the imperfect reality deflated people’s hopes. The current renewed push to develop mass market VR carries the baggage of a technology that is commonly remembered as a technological disappointment (Ryan 2001, p. 48). To overcome this history, Facebook and Oculus focus on what VR will become in the future rather than its current state, relying on the assumption of continued technological development as support. This construction of virtual reality presented by Facebook and Oculus is typical of technocratic discourse of the type Graham (2001) has identified in economic policy documents. This discourse presents desirable utopian futures by employing language that presents these futures as factual, when they may actually be contestable (Roderick 2016). By using future tense constructions (‘will be’) and forward-looking expressions (‘platforms of tomorrow’, ‘the next’, ‘only just the beginning’), these statements assure readers of this vision. Zuckerberg even equates VR with the future with his final statement that ‘the future is coming’. While these texts do hedge somewhat with expressions such as ‘chance to create’ and ‘we believe’, the imagined future is deemed to be manifestly achievable by placing it alongside other successful technologies that are now in everyday use. As computers and smartphones, so VR.

The implication in Zuckerberg’s statement above is that computers and smartphones—the technologies themselves—effected change in people’s lives, and VR will do likewise. In positioning VR this way, Facebook and Oculus employ discourses of technological determinism, which assume that technology itself is the cause of social change, and pay inadequate attention to the complex social, political and economic forces involved (Roderick 2016). Describing VR as ‘transformative and disruptive’ implies the technology itself has the power of social change. Whether individuals wish to socialise and communicate in a virtual reality is a question already resolved; this is the rhetorical work done by describing VR as the ‘dream’. Virtual realities, especially in their (imagined) ultimate ‘holodeck’ realisation, are desirable places because they can be anything we wish them to be. VR as a technology is constructed as valuable and important for this same reason: it can, potentially, cater to any individual and be put to use in an endless number of ways, all of which are deemed to be achievable with continued technological development. By using discourses of technological

determinism, VR's proponents invest the technology with immanent potential. It is capable of delivering any number of dreams, if not yet then surely in the future; all that is required is for technology to develop further.

A focus on technological potential is perhaps to be expected from the companies producing and selling the hardware, but similar discourses are employed in newspaper coverage as well. In summarising the technology for readers, articles briefly recap VR's past failure before a similar narrative of technological improvement explains why things could be different this time. From the *New York Times* (26 Mar 2014):

- 'For tech fanatics, virtual reality is a long-running dream that has never quite made the leap from *Star Trek* and other science fiction fantasies into a product that ordinary people would buy. It has made modest inroads in some industrial and medical applications – for treating post-traumatic stress disorder in veterans, for example.

  'There is hope among virtual reality aficionados that now may finally be the technology's moment. Essential components for virtual reality headsets, like high-resolution screens and motion sensors, are now relatively cheap and plentiful because of the boom in mobile devices, allowing companies like Oculus VR to make higher-quality, better-priced products than those in the past.'

The *Los Angeles Times* (28 Mar 2014):

- 'Virtual reality incited a lot of buzz and briefly infiltrated pop culture in the 1980s and 1990s, but never really got off the ground. Many early versions were poorly made, uncomfortable and caused viewers to suffer from motion sickness. Soon the movement was relegated to the fringes of technological development, with the exception of high-end uses such as flight training and military tools.

  'Nowadays, motion-control advancements better allow for head tracking and cut down on delays in response time, meaning the images on the Rift screen move

with the tilt of the player's head. Software is also powerful enough to correct for lens distortion, and advances made in the mobile market have helped make such technology affordable because component parts are much cheaper.'

The *Toronto Star* (27 Mar 2014):

- 'As a technology, virtual reality has been much maligned over the past 30 years. Many companies have tried but failed to make it work. Typical setbacks include the comfort of the headgear, the lack of available software, issues with onscreen lag or control latency, and even motion sickness among users...

  'As a technology, virtual reality still has a long way to go before we're all strapping on headsets and jacking into a Facebook-powered Matrix. But with one of the world's richest companies on board, the virtual future is going to be a lot more interesting than its troubled past.'

The *Herald Sun* (10 Jun 2014):

- 'While VR goggles have been demonstrated for decades, it is only now that screen technology has become cheap and light enough for mass-market opportunities.'

Both the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* describe VR as a 'dream' born of 'science fiction', and all these articles describe it as a futuristic technology with great potential. This 'long-running dream' may now be realised, not due to shifting consumer desires or due to new VR applications, but because the technology has 'finally' reached a point where VR is good enough and cheap enough. The dream has not changed, only the ability to realise it. An article on *GamesIndustry.biz* (21 Mar 2014) discussing the commercial potential of VR also relies on technological progression, even using it to shore up VR in the case of another commercial failure:

- ‘The technological problems which held back previous generations of VR have been overcome by smaller, lighter, sharper LED and OLED displays with incredible pixel densities, by superbly sensitive accelerometers and gyroscopes, and by vastly powerful GPUs capable of maintaining the framerates needed for immersive VR without a sick-bag to hand …

  ‘[E]ven if this revolution stumbles and falls in the consumer arena, the efforts being made in technology and design will undoubtedly help to fuel another VR effort further down the line. This is one dream that seems very unlikely to be abandoned, no matter how many times it fails to win traction among consumers, and one day the technology will be cheap and ubiquitous enough to make truly mass-market success inevitable’ (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 21 Mar 2014).

Here again, it is technological improvement that makes the dream ‘inevitable’. As these quotes show, the coverage across all these publications considers technological advancement the key to realising VR’s potential. New improvements and approaches, along with new and cheaper components, have allowed companies to create new products, which we are told now have a better chance at commercial success. But so central is the notion of *potential* to constructions of VR that even the current state of the technology—which we are assured has overcome the problems of earlier attempts—has apparently not met its potential as envisioned by these writers. Attention remains focused on the future; hence the statement made to *GamesIndustry.biz* (20 Dec 2013) by Oculus’s vice president of product that ‘I think what a lot of gamers are going to be blown away by is five years from now when they’re playing whatever it is on Rift 2.0 on their PC’. A game developer similarly describes current VR technology as ‘Version 1 of a technology that’s going to completely change the world by Version 5’ (*New York Times*, 24 Mar 2014). No matter the advances made, the realisation of VR’s potential always seems to be a few years away. The use of these technocratic, future-focused discourses in Oculus’s PR efforts invites users to participate in the creation of the ‘dream’ of fully immersive media, even if the technology is not ready to fully deliver this experience yet. The readiness with which mainstream coverage of VR takes up this discourse of the ‘dream’ demonstrates how full immersion in virtual spaces is a key aspect of how media development, especially games, is imagined and valued.

VR at the poles of gaming's field

Building on the above analysis, which focused mainly on discourses expressed by Oculus and mainstream publications, these following sections look more deeply at the enthusiast websites' coverage of virtual reality as a game technology and how this coverage changed following Facebook's acquisition of Oculus. Firstly, the discursive construction of VR as a gaming 'dream' is explored in further detail. The potential realisation of the dream of immersion in virtual game spaces is found to similarly rely on expectations of continual technological improvement, as well as the passion and creativity of VR developers. The next section then explores the reactions to Facebook's acquisition of Oculus, showing how this event led to a more pessimistic reappraisal of VR technology based on the perceived 'authenticity' of these two companies. The chapter ends by considering how this discursive shift repositioned VR in gaming's field and shows how, while VR was initially hailed as the realisation of autonomous gaming values, Facebook's sudden involvement complicated this narrative.

The 'dream' of immersive gaming

Describing virtual reality as a 'dream' is a strong statement, suggesting that what VR offers is the realisation of longstanding, ambitious gaming desires, but it is clear that for writers in these enthusiast websites, the 'dream' is indeed to be fully immersed in game worlds. As was discussed in Chapter 3, the concept of immersion is widely used in the enthusiast websites to describe good-quality games and positive play experiences. The centrality of the concept in enthusiast discourse thus explains the excitement about virtual reality. Immersion is the *sine qua non* of VR gaming, and is considered the ultimate goal:

- 'The dream is to be part of the game, and we have the technology [virtual reality headsets] to make that happen' (game developer quote, *Eurogamer*, 20 Apr 2014).

- ‘[W]hen you start to get the hang of using your sight line to lock onto enemies while keeping your ship on course, it sinks in: you’re enveloped in *Valkyrie*’s [CCP Games 2016] fictional skirmishes in ways that wouldn’t be possible without the immersion of VR’ (*Gamespot*, 19 Jun 2014).
- ‘“The immersion-breaking factor [in VR game play] is the keyboard. We thought OK, until there’s something like a kinetic interface for your hands, let’s just try and minimize the keyboard interaction so we don’t break the immersion,” Thorisson explained’ (*Polygon*, 19 May 2014).
- ‘“Virtual reality—I mean truly accurate, comfortable virtual reality—is the most important thing to happen to interactive entertainment in decades,” [game developer Paul] Bettner said. “I know it sounds like exaggeration, but it’s impossible to explain what this is like to someone who hasn’t experienced it for themselves. Your brain is convinced that you are somewhere else, that you are in another world”’ (*Polygon*, 25 Jun 2014).
- ‘VR is a lifelong dream of many technologists. Ever since we first walked down a corridor in *Wolfenstein 3D* [id Software 1992], we’ve dreamed of removing the greatest barrier to immersion in that experience—the monitor screen sitting in front of our faces, a flat, frustrating window that separates us from the increasingly beautiful and compelling worlds behind its dull glass’ (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 21 Mar 2014).

These last two quotes in particular highlight the importance of immersion to a particular conception of digital game history. By citing 1992’s *Wolfenstein 3D*, one of the earliest and most influential 3D first-person shooters, the *GamesIndustry.biz* writer posits immersion as what players have been desiring for decades, and what developers have been striving for. Anything separating the player from the game world is a ‘barrier’ to that goal. Likewise, the game developer quoted in *Polygon* considers the experience of feeling part of a game world the ‘most important’ development in decades. This immersive trajectory of game history is extended when writers call VR ‘the future’:

- ‘Little did I know that I was walking into a demo that would forever alter my opinion of VR and its potential to change not only gaming, but our relationship with technology at large … It’s still the early days, but with the right experience

under your belt, I think you'll agree that VR is the future' (*Gamespot*, 22 Mar 2014).

- 'Everything about it felt fresh, inviting and new. I put my head down on the train tracks [in the VR game *Lucky's Tale*, Playful 2016] to watch the action, and saw the future' (*Polygon*, 25 Jun 2014).

The 'future' orientation of VR game discourse is also evident when writers suggest that VR represents the 'real' or 'true' next-generation of games:

- 'As impressive as the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One are, they ultimately represent escalation rather than true innovation. More polygons, more speed, more, more, more … I've found more entertainment, more potential, while rummaging through these uploads [i.e. experimental game prototypes for Oculus's Rift] than in any next-gen console game I've played so far … [Buying an Oculus Rift development kit] was a down payment on the future—on the promise of a new toy today that will play host to even greater entertainment as the technology matures. Uncertainty. Experimentation. Surprise. That, for me, is what a truly next-generation experience should be about' (*Eurogamer*, 4 Jan 2014).
- 'Seeing the games that have been created for the now nearly obsolete [Oculus Rift] development kit and the strides being made towards the final product has been more than exciting; this is a look into what could be the 'real' next-generation of gaming' (*Polygon*, 10 Jan 2014).
- 'After our hands-on experience [with Sony's Morpheus headset], the potential here is intoxicating: virtual reality could well become the true next-generation in interactive entertainment that we've been waiting for' (*Eurogamer*, 25 May 2014).

As these quotes show, just as with Oculus's PR discourse and the mainstream newspaper coverage of VR, immersive VR gaming is presented as an experience that has not quite arrived yet; it is something still to be fully realised. This is true somewhat in material terms, as at the time of these articles' publication VR headsets such as the Rift and Sony's Morpheus (later PlayStation VR) were not yet commercially available

in their final form. But it is also the case discursively. As with the newspaper coverage explored above, VR is constructed in the enthusiast websites as a technology that will continue to improve. Headsets are expected to get more advanced, leading to better play experiences. The Oculus executive speaking of 'Rift 2.0' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 20 Dec 2013) even before Rift 1.0 was available is a clear example of VR's discursive positioning as something always improving and never final. This expectation of continually improving technology means the 'dream' VR offers is always tantalisingly close to being realised. By constructing VR in discourses of technological progress, enthusiast media coverage also establishes the technology's *potential* as a key feature of it, and a reason to be excited.

Much of the enthusiasm about VR is therefore expressed in the same discourses of potential that, as discussed in Chapter 5, are a central feature of enthusiast game culture. The centrality of potential in enthusiast game discourse, fuelled by the continual development of technology, reinforces the construction of games and platforms as always unsettled—always becoming something else. VR technology is similarly presented as full of potential, but with the added expectation that it will deliver 'the dream' and 'the future' of immersive game play. The Xbox One and PlayStation 4 consoles, which represented the 'next-generation' of consoles at this time, had been released in November 2013, only months before the publication of these articles. The excitement about VR in the above quotes is expressed in comparison to these new consoles, which are considered too similar to their predecessors to genuinely be called 'next-generation'. Each truly new generation of game hardware, it is implied, must deliver sufficiently new and different experiences. The coverage of virtual reality ramps up this rhetoric. Unlike the potential of new consoles to deliver improved but fundamentally similar experiences—more power, or better graphics, or other improvements to current capabilities—the key to VR's potential is the anticipation of a markedly different kind of play experience. For example, a *Eurogamer* writer (8 Mar 2014) cites 'the upcoming VR revolution, spearheaded by Oculus Rift' as a key advantage of the PC platform over consoles. In this same vein, several articles quote VR hardware and software developers promoting the technology's potential to change games:

- '"People are so tired of the last 15 years of the game industry, hearing about 'greater visual fidelity,'" [Oculus's head of worldwide publishing, David] De Martini said. "No one cares about greater visual fidelity anymore. It's already good enough. We don't need things to look even better; we need the experience to fundamentally change, and the Oculus platform is a fundamental change to how people will experience games"' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 20 Dec 2013).
- 'But with Oculus Rift, the potential to create emotions is so much greater. Touching and playing with Oculus Rift, you realize it's a moment where things are changing, when you see that entertainment is moving to somewhere new' (*Polygon*, 4 Dec 2013, quoting *The 7th Guest* (Trilobyte 1993) designer Graeme Devine).
- 'We're on the cusp, potentially, of a really big transformation in how games are built and played' (*Eurogamer*, 7 Apr 2014, quoting a marketer at game developer CCP Games)
- '"We see [virtual reality] as an opportunity to reinvent the game experience," [developer Hrafn Thorri] Thorisson explained' (*Polygon*, 19 May 2014).

The expectation of continued technological development accounts for *how* these (potential) changes to the play experience are deemed to be achievable. But the other important element in the construction of the VR dream is *who* will deliver it. The VR hardware and software developers who are discussed, interviewed, quoted, and made visible in enthusiast website coverage are presented as creative and innovative people motivated by a 'passion' for virtual reality. A *Eurogamer* writer approvingly notes the 'anything-goes ethos' of 'the grassroots PC development community' making games for the Rift (*Eurogamer*, 4 Jan 2014). As already quoted above, the writer says he has 'found more entertainment, more potential' in these experimental VR games 'than in any next-gen console game I've played so far'. A *Polygon* writer describes a 'silly' but 'brilliant' VR game about dolphins cheating on a test (*Classroom Aquatic*, Sunken Places 2017) in very similar terms, saying the game 'has me more excited about the future than most other big-name games this year' (*Polygon*, 10 Jan 2014). Another *Polygon* article (19 May 2014) about some independent VR developers, who had made some prototype games for the Rift, describes them as 'underground stars of virtual reality'. The reason for forming their game studio, the article says, is 'to try to push the

world of virtual reality forward'. Because VR games are new and largely experimental, developers are perceived as pioneers driven by a passion for VR gaming above all else, such as when a VR game developer is quoted as saying 'I have worked my entire career to get to this moment, to create something like this' (*Polygon*, 25 Jun 2014).

This positioning of VR developers has much in common with the way 'indie' developers are afforded artistic credibility, often in contrast to larger development studios and their big-budget games (see Chapter 5). The VR developers discussed in enthusiast coverage are also 'independent' in the sense that they are not funded by major game publishers, and this is what allows them to be characterised as 'underground stars'. As with other 'indies', the contrast drawn between the work of 'grassroots' VR developers and not-truly-next-generation consoles and their big-budget games lends an authenticity to VR creators and their work. VR gaming is conceptualised as controlled and led by developers who are creative and driven by their passion. Following from the construction of VR as something that will 'change games', these developers are positioned at the forefront of gaming's future. The passion, creativity, and innovation required to deliver the 'dream' of immersive gaming is thus a key aspect of the construction of VR hardware and software.

The figure of Palmer Luckey, the then-CEO of Oculus, is also an important part of this 'grassroots' origin. Luckey used crowdfunding to help build the Rift, and was described as 'an indie darling among developers' (*New York Times*, 27 Mar 2014). Luckey's personal background, as conveyed in media coverage, is also one of humble beginnings. A *New York Times* article published just after Facebook's acquisition of his company (27 Mar 2014) is representative of how Luckey was typically depicted. In the article, he is described as 'a baby-faced 21-year-old college dropout' who 'tinkered' away in his parents' garage and made a 'crude but working prototype' of the Rift held together with duct tape[46]. While his company had just been purchased for $2 billion, he is described

[46] This origin story was later called 'completely false' by ZeniMax Media in a lawsuit accusing Oculus of relying on VR development work done by ZeniMax (Korosec 2017). Regardless of the story's veracity, what matters here is the way Luckey and his company were depicted in media coverage.

as a ‘brilliant’ tech genius rather than a businessman: He ‘had difficulty figuring out how to complete the online paperwork’ required to start his company, and he ‘walks around barefoot at the office’. Luckey’s story, as told in the *New York Times*, is that of the quintessential American entrepreneur whose ‘passion’ took him from humble origins to great success. Having started out with spare parts and duct tape, he now had a chance, in his own words, to ‘change the world’ (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 4 Mar 2014). While the *New York Times* describes Luckey’s success in financial terms—placing Oculus among a number of Los Angeles start-ups that together ‘attracted more than $1 billion in venture financing in 2013’ (*New York Times*, 27 Mar 2014)—it is his passion for virtual reality rather than any business nous that lends him credibility and authenticity in media coverage.

To summarise, the ‘dream’ that is often described in the coverage of VR involves immersive play experiences that are significantly different from established modes of digital play. However, while there is a great deal of excitement expressed in these publications about the potential of VR to ‘change games’, the desire for change is not a rejection of gaming as it stands. Instead, VR is put forward as the realisation of a longstanding, legitimised goal: immersion in game worlds. VR is considered to be an exciting development because it is an *extension* of a purported immersive trajectory in the history of game development. In this way, the coverage of VR reproduces established forms of value held by enthusiasts: that is, full immersion in game worlds afforded by advanced technology and created by creative and innovative developers who are passionate about games. This was the dominant construction of VR gaming in enthusiast websites up until 25 March 2014 when Facebook purchased Oculus. The next section considers changes to the discursive construction of VR following this event.

Oculus and Facebook: a conflict over authenticity

The potential of VR to deliver the dream of immersive gaming was initially met with great excitement by writers in the enthusiast websites. These publications greeted Facebook’s acquisition of Oculus with surprise, and reactions to it varied among enthusiast writers, ranging from highly positive (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 26 Mar 2014) to

strongly negative (*Eurogamer*, 26 Mar 2014). On the whole, however, this event results in a noticeable change to the coverage of VR. Very similar tensions to those discussed in previous chapters—between 'core' and 'casual' audiences, between creativity and commercialism, between pleasurable and instrumental uses of digital play, and between the autonomous and heteronomous poles of gaming's field—play out in VR coverage following Facebook's acquisition.

To understand the reactions to Facebook's purchase of Oculus, it is necessary to revisit Oculus's 2012 Rift Kickstarter pitch. The Kickstarter project page describes the Rift as a VR headset 'designed specifically for video games'; as allowing users to 'step inside your favorite game'; as 'designed for gamers, by gamers'; and as designed by a team that is 'passionate about changing the way people experience video games forever' (Kickstarter 2019). The pitch very directly mobilised gaming and gamers—and with Palmer Luckey fronting the company, Oculus's public face was himself a young white male gamer. The company's association with John Carmack, who later joined Oculus as chief technology officer, further cemented its credentials among game enthusiasts. Carmack had worked on numerous immersive, first-person shooters considered classics of the genre, including *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software 1992), *Doom* (id Software 1993), and *Quake* (id Software 1996), and so his own creative output was strongly aligned with the goals of Oculus. The Kickstarter also described the Rift using the legitimising discourses of innovation, change, and immersion: the 'cutting edge' hardware offers 'a truly immersive experience' that allows users to 'step inside' a game, 'explore new worlds like never before', and experience 'pure, uninhibited fun'. The Rift will 'change the way you think about gaming forever', and it represents 'the future of gaming' (Kickstarter 2019). In short, the crowdfunding campaign was aimed squarely at enthusiast gamers, and claimed authenticity for Oculus and the Rift according to the values of enthusiast game cultures.

This gaming-focused Kickstarter campaign is a stark contrast to Facebook's press release announcing the acquisition of Oculus, which as discussed earlier emphasised the non-gaming uses:

> While the applications for virtual reality technology beyond gaming are in their nascent stages, several industries are already experimenting with the technology, and Facebook plans to extend Oculus' existing advantage in gaming to new verticals, including communications, media and entertainment, education and other areas. Given these broad potential applications, virtual reality technology is a strong candidate to emerge as the next social and communications platform (Facebook Newsroom 2014).

Whereas the Kickstarter focused on individuals' game play experiences, Facebook's press release emphasised VR's 'potential applications' in a variety of industries. Mark Zuckerberg, in his Facebook post discussing the acquisition, identified games as 'just the start' of the company's plans, then highlighted some additional non-gaming uses: 'Imagine enjoying a court side seat at a [basketball] game, studying in a classroom of students and teachers all over the world or consulting with a doctor face-to-face' (Zuckerberg 2014). Education and health—the same instrumental benefits frequently used to legitimise digital play (see Chapter 4)—are here, in this wider commercial context of media and public relations, invoked to establish the importance and utility of VR outside of a gaming setting[47]. However, within gaming's field and especially in enthusiast discourse, the value of these instrumental uses is less clear. *Eurogamer*'s editor-in-chief dismisses Zuckerberg's examples by reducing them to 'blah blah teachers and doctors or whatever' and suggests that Facebook seemingly wants to 'get this silly gaming stuff out of the way as quickly as possible' (*Eurogamer*, 26 Mar 2014). The fear that gaming is considered less worthwhile than these instrumental applications of VR is palpable.

The involvement of Facebook specifically is a major reason for the contentious coverage. *Eurogamer*'s editor-in-chief calls Facebook 'a company whose main

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[47] Education and health were also key focuses when, in December 2016, a number of major companies involved in VR development—including Facebook/Oculus, Google, HTC, Samsung, and Sony—formed the Global Virtual Reality Association (now XR Association) to 'foster dialogue' between stakeholders. In line with Facebook's 2014 rhetoric, these companies stressed VR's 'potential to be the next great computing platform, improving sectors ranging from education to healthcare, and contribute significantly to the global economy' (XR Association 2016). The Association's press release and website did not mention games at all.

relationship with games is helping the people who make horrendous ones become extraordinarily rich' (*Eurogamer*, 26 Mar 2014). This mention of 'horrendous' games is in reference to 'casual' Facebook games which, since around 2007, have often been criticised as low-quality by enthusiasts (Mäyrä et al. 2017). A *GamesIndustry.biz* writer (28 Mar 2014), while excited by Facebook's involvement, notes that the company is 'deeply disliked by plenty of core gamers'. A *Polygon* writer (26 Mar 2014) likewise notes that '[n]o one likes Facebook; it's the site your parents use to comment on baby pictures'. Games on Facebook are the sort of 'casual' games that dominate mobile platforms, and so are devalued by these publications in the same way as outlined in Chapter 6: they are perceived as simple games designed for non-'core' players ('your parents', perhaps, and anyone else outside the constructed young male enthusiast audience) and more concerned with making money than providing a high-quality play experience. The same dichotomy of core and casual (referring to both games and players) discussed in Chapter 6 thus plays a role in the reaction to Facebook's involvement in VR. Whereas immersive VR game play is a dream of enthusiasts, Facebook is depicted as a company that lacks credibility with games. This was the crux of *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) designer Markus Persson's objection to Facebook's acquisition of Oculus. In comments widely reported at the time, Persson announced that he had cancelled plans to release a version of his game for the Rift because 'Facebook creeps me out' (*New York Times*, 27 Mar 2014). Noting Facebook's emphasis on the social applications of VR, Persson stated that 'I don't want to work with social, I want to work with games' (Hamilton 2014).

While some writers do welcome Facebook's purchase of Oculus, this is more despite Facebook's involvement than because of it. For a *GamesIndustry.biz* writer (28 Mar 2014), Facebook's funding makes VR 'even more exciting than it was last week', but this excitement is predicated on the expectation that 'Facebook's role will fade into the background'[48], and the article focuses on the implications for Oculus as a 'game technology' company rather than the broader applications that Facebook promoted in its

[48] This expectation has not panned out, with Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg taking a leading role in the company's promotion of VR.

announcements. A *Polygon* writer (26 Mar 2014) welcomes the purchase not because of what Facebook or Oculus will do with VR, but because the writer expects it to speed up VR development in general, creating opportunities for competitors. The writer fears that Facebook will make the Oculus development ecosystem a walled garden, but this 'gives other products the ability to launch with a more open solution and capture the enthusiast market'.

However, the impact of Facebook's involvement is more significant than simply an objection to that specific company and its perceived lack of credibility with games. Following the acquisition, there is a noticeable change to the discursive construction of VR as a platform for games. From this point on, some scepticism about VR technology itself begins to appear in the enthusiast websites. In an article published the day after Facebook's announcement, *Eurogamer*'s editor-in-chief argues that 'cash and stock swirling around Palo Alto [the location of Facebook's headquarters at the time]—and not even a particularly large amount of it by Silicon Valley standards—doesn't suddenly prove the transformative potential of VR', and concludes that until VR headsets are available to buy 'you're still only looking at potential' (*Eurogamer*, 26 Mar 2014). This sudden devaluing of VR's potential is a dramatic reversal compared to earlier coverage, in which potential is the very thing that fuels excitement about VR. A *GamesIndustry.biz* writer (7 Apr 2014) expresses the same kind of scepticism. Responding to a game developer's assertion that VR will be a phenomenon even bigger than smartphones, the writer advises readers to 'stop hyperventilating' about VR because 'all too often the reality falls far short of the early promises'. Hardware on its own 'is meaningless', and what matters instead is 'the quality of the game'. After outlining a number of barriers to VR's success, including its likely high cost and possible inducement of motion sickness, the writer concludes that while VR 'does have great potential', its status as a game platform is 'still not anywhere close to fruition, and it's not at all certain it can ever be the case' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 7 Apr 2014). The discourse of VR's potential gives way to one of realisation and 'success', or lack of it; VR's future is suddenly clouded unless it can actually deliver on its promise of immersive game play.

A *Gamespot* article (22 Apr 2014) further demonstrates this discursive shift. A contributor discusses his experience using VR technology, and writes that 'while I see the potential, the immediate results have left much to be desired'. Another contributor to the same article writes that 'I don't always want to be fully immersed' in media, a rare critique of the immersive trajectory heralded by VR. The day after the acquisition of Oculus, another *Gamespot* writer (26 Mar 2014) even calls VR headsets 'a dead-end technology', the most negative appraisal of VR in any of the coverage. *Eurogamer*'s deputy editor draws comparisons between VR and motion control devices—Microsoft's Kinect[49], Sony's PlayStation Move, and Nintendo's Wii Remote as well as its old Power Glove from the late 1980s—to suggest that VR may end up as merely a short-lived gimmick (*Eurogamer*, 17 May 2014). While these publications do continue to express some optimism about VR—for example, a later *Polygon* article (25 Jun 2014) still describes a positive VR play experience as representing 'the future'—the involvement of Facebook results in a clear change to the discursive positioning of VR in gaming's field. The next section discusses this repositioning as part of the struggle for the field's autonomy.

'Something that is ours': the autonomous values of gaming's field

In the enthusiast websites, emerging consumer VR products such as the Rift are initially welcomed unequivocally as exciting technologies. They are constructed by these publications with the use of the legitimising game discourses discussed throughout the previous two chapters. Specifically, the hailing of creative and innovative VR hardware design, the technology's immersiveness, its promise of new and different play experiences, and its boundless potential, positions VR as the encapsulation of what is considered desirable about games in enthusiast cultures. Put another way, when VR is understood and discussed specifically as a game technology, it expresses and reinforces the autonomous values of the field espoused by these publications. These are the

[49] This *Eurogamer* article was published shortly after Microsoft announced it was no longer bundling the Kinect with every Xbox One console, a move that signalled the device's decline. In October 2017, Microsoft announced it was longer manufacturing the Kinect at all as a consumer device.

grounds on which the autonomy of gaming's field is sought. VR is considered the (potential) realisation of enthusiasts' desires—of the ideal of 'gaming'. The description of immersive VR game play as 'the dream' and 'the future' makes this positioning clear. But the fact that these descriptions are also used in mainstream media coverage of VR shows that immersion in virtual worlds is more than just a preoccupation of enthusiasts; it also partly constitutes wider cultural understandings of digital games.

The acquisition of Oculus by Facebook is a major event in terms of the discursive positioning of VR in gaming's field. Crucially, the pre-Facebook construction of VR sees the technology as emerging *from* gaming and intended primarily *for* gaming[50]. The importance of this perceived origin is demonstrated by a *Gamespot* article (26 Mar 2014) discussing the backlash to Facebook's acquisition. The author describes Oculus as 'a grassroots company' whose headset was funded by 'ordinary people' in its Kickstarter campaign:

- 'No, it was not a giant corporation that saw the brilliance of this device. It was ordinary people who did—people with a vision and just enough extra money to see their dream realized' (*Gamespot*, 26 Mar 2014).

The genesis of the Rift as 'for gamers, by gamers' (Kickstarter 2019) is vital in understanding the reactions to Facebook's purchase of Oculus. The Rift was seen as developed by and belonging to a game technology company—and, as a result of the Rift crowdfunding campaign, belonging to some degree to gamers themselves. With Oculus leading the way, the 'future' of gaming was being claimed by a company that was seen as credible and authentic. Oculus, along with VR game developers, was positioned at the autonomous pole of gaming's field in that it was seen as driven by a passion for immersive gaming rather than an economic or any other motive.

[50] VR of course has a much longer history, much of it unrelated to the game industry (Hillis 1999, pp. 1-29), but the recent re-emergence of VR in mainstream and enthusiast media coverage was prompted by the success of the 2012 Rift Kickstarter campaign, which positioned VR as a gaming product.

The acquisition of Oculus by a large social media company, whose previous history with games involved the same kind of 'casual' games that are typically devalued in these enthusiast publications, suddenly derailed the narrative of a small game technology company succeeding 'against the odds' with the financial help of 'ordinary' gamers. Even though Oculus continued producing its headset and facilitating the creation of VR games, with Facebook at the helm the authenticity of Oculus was tarnished—hence the suggestion by a *Polygon* writer that other competitors might now 'capture the enthusiast market' instead (26 Mar 2014). The symbolic capital Oculus had accrued among enthusiasts dissipated as Facebook, with its economic capital, claimed a stake in VR. As a *Gamespot* writer puts it, 'we thought of [Oculus] as a grassroots company that listened to us. And that feeling has changed now that Facebook owns them' (26 Mar 2014). The Rift—the most prominent VR headset at this time, and the one that began as 'for gamers, by gamers'—was now funded and controlled by a social media company that emphasised VR's utility as a more general communications platform. The Rift could still be used for gaming, but it no longer *belonged* to gaming. Writing about this loss of the Rift as a game-focused technology, *Eurogamer*'s editor-in-chief laments that 'we feel like something that is ours is being taken away from us' (26 Mar 2014). Gaming was suddenly only one use among many for this 'new social and communications platform', compromising enthusiasts' attempts to establish the autonomy of gaming's field around VR's promise and potential.

In this repositioning of VR in gaming's field, similar dynamics to those outlined in the previous chapter are evident. Much like how mobile games and their developers are devalued because they are perceived as being more concerned with monetisation than good game design, Facebook's involvement in VR exposes tensions between the field's heteronomous and autonomous forms of value that these publications work to establish. While Mark Zuckerberg expresses excitement about potential VR applications, there is a preponderance of speculation about the economic motivations for Facebook's acquisition of Oculus, in both mainstream and enthusiast coverage (e.g. *Eurogamer*, 26 Mar 2014; *GamesIndustry.biz*, 26 Mar 2014; *Los Angeles Times*, 26 Mar 2014; *New York Times*, 26 Mar 2014; *Vancouver Sun*, 27 Mar 2014). Because Facebook is presented as motivated by a future return on investment, its interests are not thought to

be aligned with those of VR gaming enthusiasts. For example, *Eurogamer* (26 Mar 2014) suggests that Facebook will collect and use VR data for its targeted advertising business. An economic motive is entirely lacking in the coverage of VR game developers, who instead are seen as driven by their passion, and are thus legitimised as authentic.

Further complicating the positioning of VR as a game technology—though in uneven ways across the publications—are the instrumental uses of VR emphasised by Facebook. Whereas *Eurogamer*'s editor-in-chief is dismissive of 'teachers and doctors or whatever' (26 Mar 2014), other writers are more positive about these instrumental uses for their potential to legitimise VR in the 'mainstream'. For example, shortly before Facebook's acquisition, a *Gamespot* writer suggests that non-gaming uses of VR, such as treating mental health, can 'bolster its legitimacy' (22 Mar 2014). One of the most positive reactions to Facebook's acquisition is from a *GamesIndustry.biz* writer who suggests that Facebook's resources can help VR 'go mainstream' and 'help humanity' in areas such as science, medicine, and aviation (26 Mar 2014). The possibility that VR could become a mainstream technology through these instrumental uses is, in fact, one reason why VR is invested with so much hope and expectation in enthusiast publications. VR was both a form of gaming that represented the autonomous values of the field claimed by enthusiasts *and* a way to increase the value of gaming capital in other fields. As discussed in Chapter 4, instrumentality is a key area where stakeholders such as industry groups seek to establish the relevance and value of digital games. In the same way, instrumental uses of VR can increase the value and legitimacy of games—but only for as long as VR is understood primarily as a game technology. The privileging of instrumentality hinges on the perceived ownership of VR. Importantly, the optimistic *GamesIndustry.biz* writer just mentioned (26 Mar 2014) sees VR as emerging 'from the video game sector' even after Facebook's involvement—but as discussed above, other writers are much more opposed to the acquisition. For them, the construction of VR as purely a game technology was undermined once Oculus was purchased, resulting in the tensions outlined above. The scepticism about VR that begins to appear in the enthusiast coverage from this point on is attributable to the perceived loss of VR as something produced by and for gaming, and a resultant drop in excitement for it.

In this analysis of how VR reflects and reinforces the values established in gaming's field, there is an important question to ask: whose values are these, and whose 'dream' does VR represent? The previous chapter established that these websites tend to address a 'core' gaming audience, or at least maintain a distinction between the core and non-core, resulting in the exclusion of anyone who does not quite fit. So when *Eurogamer*, for example, describes VR as the experience '*we've* been waiting for' (25 May 2014), the pronoun must be understood as exclusionary. Mobile platforms have certainly changed games too, but as Chapter 6 detailed, those changes have been met with fierce resistance by these enthusiast websites. The contrast between the construction of VR gaming and mobile gaming in these websites is particularly stark. Whereas VR is perceived as driven, at least initially, by a grassroots creativity and new kinds of play experiences, mobile platforms are perceived as dominated by a few big companies and a 'deluge' of unimaginative, cloned games; VR offers the immersive game play desired by enthusiasts, while mobile offers casual games for the non-'core'; a future of VR gaming is welcomed, while a future of mobile gaming is feared. Change is welcomed only as long as it accords with the desires of enthusiasts, which in the case of VR means more in-depth and immersive interactions with games.

Immersion may be a desirable feature of games for some enthusiasts, but not for all game players. The kind of 'casual' mobile games discussed in Chapter 6, such as *Candy Crush Saga*, are not immersive in the same way that virtual reality games are. For someone who plays a mobile puzzle game to fill a few spare minutes (or even a few spare hours), a bulky headset that blocks out the real world in favour of a virtual one probably has little use. There is nothing inherently inferior about a lack of immersive play in virtual game worlds, but this is the implication when VR is described as 'the dream' and 'the future' of games. Anything that does not appear to be part of this immersive trajectory is consigned to the past or sidelined because it lacks the characteristics that supposedly authentic gaming has. As a result of this discursive positioning, there is a danger that excitement about virtual reality could perpetuate the same old exclusionary game cultures focused on the young male consumer, expensive hardware, and specific kinds of games. The association of VR with particular audiences

and play experiences is evident in this excerpt from *GamesIndustry.biz*, which describes 'core gaming' as essentially under siege by mobile games:

- 'Few core gamers welcome sweeping predictions that we'll all be gaming on mobile phones in the not-too-distant future, leading to a feeling that core gaming needs something new, big and exciting to justify the high costs and bulky, whirring boxes. VR could be just that something, a white knight riding in to save the core gaming market with the kind of experience mobile games are unlikely to offer for quite some time, if ever' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 21 Mar 2014)[51].

When VR is called the 'real' or 'true' next-generation, even consoles aimed at an enthusiast audience are positioned as staid and comparatively uninteresting, let alone mobile games aimed at non-'core' players. Concerned about this kind of exclusion, independent game developer and academic Robert Yang has suggested that VR may inherit undesirable aspects of 'gamer culture': 'Artists and queers and weirdos need to hit VR now, and hit hard, before VR culture ends up as conservative as the worst of gamer culture' (Yang 2016). VR creators could certainly produce a variety of content that appeals to diverse audiences—but these enthusiast publications present a particular conception of the VR 'dream' that continues to position certain kinds of play experiences as more valuable than others. Emerging VR technologies may represent 'new' platforms for gaming, but established value hierarchies such as those reinforced by enthusiast publications continue to influence VR's reception.

[51] Cheaper mobile VR options, such as Google Cardboard and Samsung Gear VR, which use mobile phones as the screen, had not been announced at the time of this article's publication. However, more expensive headsets have better capabilities such as more precise head-tracking. As is the way with this kind of technology, the newest and most expensive options will always have the best capabilities and therefore be the most desirable VR devices among enthusiasts.

Conclusion

Coverage of virtual reality ultimately reveals struggles over the value and purpose of digital games and play. From the association of virtual reality with concepts such as 'the dream' and 'the future', it is clear that VR is thought to hold great potential to deliver desirable experiences. These may be longstanding Western desires of transforming space and transcending the body (Hillis 1999), and more specifically for game enthusiasts it is the desire to feel immersed in elaborate virtual game worlds. In Mark Zuckerberg's words, the goal 'is to enable you to experience the impossible' (Zuckerberg 2014). The promise of manipulating reality is why VR is described, for example, as the 'holy grail' and the 'ultimate medium' (*Los Angeles Times*, 28 Mar 2014). These desires and rhetorics are not new (Ryan 2001). To overcome VR's history of failing to become a viable consumer device (for play or communication), media coverage relies on the expectation of continual technological development, and it is always looking ahead to what VR might eventually deliver. As a result, constructions of virtual reality invest it with seemingly limitless potential.

For writers in enthusiast publications, VR is especially enticing. VR rhetoric promises the realisation of desires that frequently appear in gaming discourses, such as being immersed in game spaces and exploring game worlds. This chapter has shown that VR's value to gaming enthusiasts is its potential to deliver the 'dream' of fully immersive gaming, and the construction of this dream is realised in discourses of potential, creativity, innovation, reinvention, and technological progress. The fact that VR is still in the very early stages of its re-emergence, along with the Rift's initial positioning as a game technology produced by a game technology company, allows enthusiasts to invest a great deal of hope and expectation in it. VR is placed into a narrative that holds immersion in game worlds to be the goal of developers and the desire of players. This promise can be delivered by creative and innovative developers motivated by a passion for VR gaming over economics. Together, these discourses construct VR as a legitimised, authentic form of gaming according to the forms of value espoused by these publications.

The hailing of VR can be understood as part of ongoing attempts to establish the legitimacy and worth of gaming as a cultural field on its own terms. For gaming to be an autonomous cultural field, internal forms of value need to be established and maintained. Enthusiast publications play an important gatekeeping role in legitimising certain platforms, games, companies, and developers as authentic, and delegitimising others. For these enthusiast websites, mobile games are considered too compromised by commercial interests, whereas VR—at least until March 2014—is the polar opposite. As we saw, one writer even calls VR a possible 'white knight' for core game audiences (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 21 Mar 2014), and this is an apt term to describe the way VR is positioned. VR is welcomed with such excitement by enthusiasts because it is presented as a technology capable of delivering legitimised game play experiences.

The reactions to Facebook's acquisition of Oculus demonstrate the importance of VR to these attempts to establish the field's autonomy. When virtual reality was thought to 'belong' to gaming, it represented a gaming-led effort to deliver enthusiasts' dreams. Any instrumental, non-game uses of VR may help to demonstrate the value of gaming, but only as long as VR's development is thought to be controlled by game companies. The discursive shifts following the acquisition of Oculus expose a central, ongoing tension between the poles of gaming's field—between internal and external forms of value. Facebook's involvement represented an intrusion of economic power and commercial interests into VR's development. While some writers do express a desire for VR to 'go mainstream' (*GamesIndustry.biz*, 26 Mar 2014), such an occurrence would have implications. To go mainstream is to be commercialised, to be opened to new audiences, and to be used in ways that enthusiasts may not value—the same trends that result in the devaluing of mobile games. Facebook's involvement may further the prospect of VR actually reaching a wide audience, but it also disrupts the basis on which the autonomy of gaming's field is sought by these publications.

The discursive process of legitimation also has consequences for which kinds of games and players are deemed to 'belong'. Establishing the value of games around particular platforms and play experiences results in a value hierarchy that is always exclusionary, and this can be clearly seen in the very different coverage of VR and mobile platforms. These last two chapters have highlighted attempts by enthusiast publications to establish

the value of games and play outside the field of power—those economic and political power structures that influence all cultural fields. But in these attempts, value is placed on particular platforms and games rather than others. VR games are presented as the work of passionate developers, whereas mobile games are devalued as the work of large, unimaginative companies. Mobile play is typically presented as useful for passing the time but little more, whereas VR play is more in-depth and immersive, and thus more aligned with the interests of enthusiasts. VR is therefore positioned as an enthusiast game platform, and mobile a 'casual' one. VR is still in the process of being established as a game platform, and may feature diverse game experiences for diverse audiences. But for as long as value-laden associations continue to exist between platforms, games, companies, developers, and players, hierarchies of value and authenticity in game cultures will continue to reproduce patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

Conclusion

This study has identified various discursive positionings according to which digital games and play practices are valued (or not) in mainstream newspapers and enthusiast websites. Analysing these two distinct data corpuses has demonstrated that the process of valuing and legitimising games and play is not straightforward, and to the extent that games can be said to be more legitimised today than in the past, this is not a linear narrative of acceptance. Instead, the process is uneven, contested, and sometimes contradictory. As terms such as the 'gameful world' (Walz & Deterding 2014) and the 'ludic century' (Zimmerman 2014) suggest, digital games are more visible in culture today than ever before. It would be easy to point to this visibility and conclude that they therefore enjoy more legitimacy, and perhaps that old debates and anxieties around violence or addiction are largely resolved. But this study has shown that the question of *how* games are valued is one with many answers that complicate any linear narrative we might be tempted to construct of games leaving behind past anxieties to become firmly entrenched in culture. Instead, games and play are subject to various techniques of legitimation specific to the context, and their value is established in complex and differing ways.

The choice of mainstream and enthusiast media data corpuses has allowed the analysis to highlight a key dynamic across this thesis of games and play being legitimised in mainstream newspapers according to wider cultural values, while at the same time enthusiasts seek to value games on their own merits in ways specific to gaming's field. The tension between these external and internal values at times leads to conflict, which was most evident in the analysis in Chapter 5. The oppositional positionings of games in the field, as economically valued on the one hand and artistically valued on the other,

show how participants in the field work to position games according to their own beliefs, knowledges, and interests. Enthusiasts seek to value games on their own merits; however, these attempts run into limitations, such as the 'potential' of games relying on technological development driven by companies' economic motives. Meanwhile, the artistic discourse of games still centres on the need for wider 'mainstream' recognition of this artistic value, suggesting this way of valuing games is still not firmly established and must instead be overtly advocated for. A similar kind of contestation between external and internal forms of value is seen in the virtual reality coverage analysed in Chapter 7, where the renewed push for consumer VR established it initially as a technology under the control of enthusiasts—specifically Oculus VR and its 'gamer' employees—who apparently valued games on their own merits, as immersive and fun experiences. But when Facebook took over, the attempts to establish the field's autonomy on the dream of fully immersive VR were thwarted by the intrusion of commercial interests. In this case, the conflict centred on attempts to establish autonomous values around enthusiasts' desires of advanced technology and immersive experiences—mainstays of enthusiast constructions of digital games and play. Thus the project of establishing an autonomous field of gaming continues, even if, as Bourdieu suggests, this can never be fully achieved because broader power structures are always in play (Bourdieu 1993, p. 39). The analysis in this thesis has shown how enthusiasts struggle to break from the industry's capitalist foundations in their attempts to establish autonomous values in gaming's field.

A similar kind of tension is evident across the constructions of digital play as a social practice analysed in Chapters 3 and 4, where play is legitimised or delegitimised in newspaper coverage in line with hegemonic ideologies of productivity and self-improvement. Play is legitimised as instrumentally useful for educational or health purposes or as a form of work, while pleasurable play remains a fraught practice, at least for most kinds of players. Across these chapters, the stereotypical construction of digital play as a wasteful and frivolous activity is very much present in the way young people's play is devalued as harmful to physical or mental health. But more than this, it is also present in the legitimised forms of play, because these practices are legitimised precisely because they operate as counter-discourses to play's supposed wastefulness. In this way, the legitimacy of play relies not on a cultural embrace of play's value but

instead on a repositioning of how games and play fit in with pre-established values. That has been a central theme of this thesis: that as games have become more established in culture, this has been achieved by aligning them with societal power structures and the hegemonic values that sustain them. This has been successful; games are certainly more visible and influential than ever before. However, as Chapter 4 argued, legitimising play in this way risks denying and suppressing the expressive and creative value of play, with gamification the clearest example of how play is repurposed in the interests of power. Furthermore, it is not clear that constructions of play as wasteful are actually overcome at all; rather, the legitimation of instrumental play is a repurposing of a practice that is still constructed in newspaper coverage as inherently harmful. It would therefore be a mistake to assume that pleasurable play benefits from the legitimation of instrumentality—and anxieties about violence and addiction are indeed still mobilised in newspaper coverage.

The finding that such anxieties still persist is further reinforced by recent media coverage of young players of the multiplayer game *Fortnite*, who are frequently described as obsessed and addicted[52]. The fact that similar anxieties about addiction have persisted since the establishment of game arcades shows this is a persistent feature of digital play discourse, or in Kirkpatrick's (2013) words, the ambiguity around addiction is a 'constitutive ambivalence' of gaming. The World Health Organization's recent inclusion of 'gaming disorder' in the International Classification of Diseases, as a 'disorder due to addictive behaviours' (World Health Organization 2019), adds institutional legitimacy to these anxieties. Interestingly, this may be one issue where criticisms of 'addictive' game mechanics are shared by mainstream media and many game players. The ability in many games to purchase 'loot boxes' from online stores, which give randomised loot to players, has attracted criticism—much of it driven by

[52] Headlines in the *Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, and the *Sydney Morning Herald* show how *Fortnite* has become a recent lightning rod in this regard: 'Addictive online shooter games such as *Fortnite* have "damaging impact" on the lives of children, warns Culture Secretary' (Daily Mail Reporter 2018); 'FORTNITE MONSTERS: These mums are footing the bill for highly addictive online game *Fortnite Battle Royale*' (Pritchard 2018); and 'Parents are losing their sons to *Fortnite*, the hottest game in the world' (King 2018).

players—for the similarity to slot machine gambling mechanics, and has led to a number of governmental inquiries or proposed legislation, including in the US (Kelly 2019), UK (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2019), Australia (Environment and Communications References Committee 2018), and Belgium (Gartenberg 2018). Belgium has now determined that some loot box implementations violate the country's gambling legislation. The prevalence today of free-to-play business models that rely on compelling players to purchase in-game items such as loot boxes means this is likely to remain a point of contention among and between players and developers. Much more so than violence, it seems likely that addiction will continue to be the focus of negative media coverage of games, and the longstanding ambivalence of the concept among players (Kirkpatrick 2013) makes this is an especially interesting issue.

Anxieties still persist then, and they influence the ways in which games and play are valued. Across this study's analysis, one of the prominent themes has been how coverage of games attempts to construct and position them as something other than what stereotypes might hold them to be. Rather than simply unproductive frivolities, games are variously valued economically, instrumentally, and artistically. In his study of how digital games were established in US culture in the 1970s and early 80s, Newman (2017, p. 201) observes that constructions of games today 'struggle against the meanings worked out during this crucial formative period of emergence'. This point is supported by the analysis in this thesis, and the effects can be seen linguistically in constructions like 'not just playing around anymore' (*New York Times*, 22 Apr 2014), and 'you can do more with this medium than make toys' (*Los Angeles Times*, 9 Feb 2014). Even among enthusiasts, this suggestion that games can be *more than* what they currently are is present in the discourses of 'potential' prevalent in enthusiast publications, and in the suggestion that VR will deliver the 'dream' of full immersion. In both enthusiast and mainstream media, games are constructed as always becoming something *more*, which implies they are currently somehow *less* than they should be. It is a curious feature of game discourse that games always seem in the process of reaching their potential, however this is asserted, and yet this never seems to be achieved to anyone's satisfaction. Many of the features this thesis has identified in media coverage of games—such as digital play's educational benefits, games as a form

of technology with immanent potential, and even games as an artform—have been present in media coverage for decades, as studies by Kirkpatrick (2013) and Newman (2017) show. Games are constructed as always changing into something else even while discourses of them remain very familiar. Coverage of virtual reality is the most striking example of this kind of stasis in game discourse, as the rhetoric of VR as the 'dream' and the 'future' echoes what we were told in the 1990s. To date, VR has still not matched the enthusiast imagination, but the dream of full immersion in virtual worlds will undoubtedly persist because it is such a central part of the discursive construction of games: that they are virtual places we can play *in*. As technological development continues, so too does the *potential* of realising the dream.

This entwinement of digital games with computing technology is a major reason why pinning down what games are and what they can offer is so contested. From the analysis across all the preceding chapters, it is evident that the *meanings* of games and play remain quite unstable, giving rise to the competing positionings and claims to value. This raises another important question that this thesis has explored: in addition to *how* games are valued, a crucial question is *for whom*? The purpose of the last two chapters, on mobile games and virtual reality, has been to demonstrate how the instability of meanings leads to gatekeeping practices around who and what is deemed to be 'authentic'. This can sometimes be very harmful, as was shown so clearly in the gamergate hate campaign that began in August 2014[53]. This thesis will end with a brief discussion of this event because, even though the study's data collection ended shortly before gamergate began and it does not feature in the data, its presence is still felt and the process of writing this thesis has been shaped by it. This thesis is not 'about' gamergate, but in a way it is unavoidably about gamergate. That event was an expression of anger and hate that profoundly affected many people who paid close attention to game industries and cultures. This thesis set out to identify ways in which digital games and play are valued across mainstream and enthusiast media, and the

[53] To briefly recap, gamergate began as abuse directed at a female game developer in August 2014, and then quickly grew to become an ongoing hate campaign motivated by paranoia that the 'gamer' identity and game culture was under threat by feminism and 'social justice warriors'. Golding and van Deventer (2016, pp. 133-149) outline specific causes and motivations.

vicious gatekeeping on display during gamergate has undoubtedly affected the way I have approached the uneven and contested practices of valuing and legitimation identified in the data.

Gamergate began years ago but never really ended, and it is important to continue to grapple with its effects and its influence. The recent publication of a series of articles in the *New York Times* in August 2019 under the umbrella headline 'Everything is Gamergate' (*New York Times* 2019) brings to mainstream attention the fact that the tactics and tenor of modern online culture wars and hate campaigns now follow the gamergate blueprint. Perhaps it has taken those five years for gamergate's significance to sink in, at least for those not directly targeted by it. David Neiwert, an expert on the far-right in the United States, notes that gamergate 'heralded the rise of the alt-right', whose characteristics he identifies as 'an Internet presence beset by digital trolls, unbridled conspiracism, angry-white-male-identity victimization culture, and, ultimately, open racism, anti-Semitism, ethnic hatred, misogyny, and sexual and gender paranoia' (Neiwert 2017, p. 215). It is important for those working in and around games to consider why game cultures offered such fertile soil for the open expression of these sentiments. Mortensen (2018) makes the point that the marginalised position of games in culture over several decades 'trained' gamers to become defensive and led to them seeing themselves as victims. This observation makes an important link between the cultural valuing of games and the actions of those embedded in game cultures. For those who had come to see games as a cultural space occupied by young men, and the 'gamer' as a meaningful identity, the perception that games were changing to accommodate more diverse players and creators was taken as a threat—hence the idea spread by gamergaters that feminism was somehow ruining games. The alt-right's suggestion that feminism is likewise ruining 'men' is the same kind of paranoia on a wider scale.

Stating this significance of gamergate is not meant to place undue blame on the enthusiast websites or mainstream newspapers analysed in this thesis, but the fact remains that publications such as these have an important role in constructing what digital games are, what kinds of games and platforms are considered 'authentic', and which players are deemed to 'belong' more than others. The data collected from mainstream and enthusiast publications from December 2013 to June 2014 certainly

does not show any of the hate that was expressed so loudly in August 2014 onward, but it does show some of the fault lines that cracked open then. As Chapters 6 and 7 showed, there are stark contrasts in the positioning of game platforms in the enthusiast publications, with mobile games devalued as overly commercialised while virtual reality is hailed as 'the future'. Associated with these platforms and their games, often overtly, are the categories of 'hard/core' and 'casual', the function of which is to maintain divisions between games, platforms, and players (Chess & Paul 2019). These divisions are reinforced by most of the enthusiast websites and contribute to the persistence of in-groups and out-groups in game cultures[54]. The newspapers studied in this thesis also make problematic contributions to constructions of authenticity and belonging by overwhelmingly depicting young male game players rather than women or older players. The disruption to the understanding of game culture as a place occupied by specific kinds of players who play specific kinds of games ultimately allows for a healthier culture and industry, but attempts to de-centre the straight white male gamer identity and create more inclusive game cultures have been met with a fierce backlash by those who want to reassert a kind of 'geek masculinity' (Braithwaite 2016). To the extent that this thesis makes a contribution to understanding gamergate, it is found in the analysis of these contestations over legitimacy and authenticity, and the visibility of some kinds of players over others.

Gamergate was and is ultimately motivated by contestations over meanings, and there will be an ongoing need for researchers to study contested meanings over what games are and are seemingly becoming—and to not just study this, but to do so with a keen sense of social justice in order to counter those who seek to maintain exclusive and

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[54] A recent manifestation of this divide occurred following the release of the action game *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (FromSoftware 2019) on consoles and PC in March 2019. Loosely part of a notoriously difficult series of games, its release prompted widespread debate over the need for difficulty settings and assistance modes for difficult games such as this one so that less skilled or less able players can still partake. Many fans of these difficult games were strongly opposed to any effort to make them easier (even optionally), and the discursive categories of 'casual' and 'hard/core' players were very much present in the debate. The importance or otherwise of game difficulty is another example of how the meanings of games remain in flux.

toxic cultures. The meanings of games are advanced and struggled over in many sites and contexts, and research that examines the interests and ideologies that guide these struggles will be important as games continue to become established in our cultures. This study has made an important contribution to understanding how digital games and play have been constructed in media coverage in recent years, adding to existing research that has looked at media coverage in earlier decades. The study of course has limitations, such as the publications chosen for analysis and the countries they are from. Future studies that explore other publications, including from non-Western and non-English-speaking countries would further expand this area of research. The analysis of written media coverage has inherent limitations as well, as it depends on what is included and excluded in the coverage. For example, factors such as the gender, age, and especially race, class, and sexuality of those involved in game industries and cultures, including players and creators, is often not stated overtly in media articles. While this study has been able to identify important imbalances of age and gender in newspaper coverage, it has not been possible to do the same regarding race, class, and sexuality. As efforts continue to decentre the *straight white* male identity in game cultures, addressing these factors is important, and additional research methodologies and data sources would lead to fruitful contributions in that regard. Mainstream and enthusiast media will continue to be important objects for this kind of research, while other textual materials worthy of discourse analysis include industry publications, advertising, government policy, and discussions among game players and developers. These all make important contributions to how games are constructed, understood, and valued. Specific issues raised in this thesis that deserve further attention include: efforts to make game cultures more inclusive; the ongoing role of addiction in game discourse; the prevalence of gamification practices in many industries, companies, and institutions; and the place of pleasurable play in societies that insist on ceaseless productivity. Exploring these topics will be important in the effort to better understand the cultural meanings, influence, and place of games and play in our societies.

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Appendices

Appendix A—Leximancer concept maps for newspapers

The following Leximancer concept maps in Appendix A and Appendix B show ‘concepts’ (the small nodes labelled in black text) and ‘themes’ (the large coloured circles showing which concepts are related more closely than others) that were identified by Leximancer’s algorithms. Together, these give a visual overview of both the frequency and relative distribution of content in these publications. To generate these maps, Leximancer’s settings were kept at their defaults. The visual settings on the maps were also kept at their defaults; that is, the top 75% of concepts are labelled, and the ‘theme size’ is set to 33% (a higher theme size would group more concepts together under fewer themes).

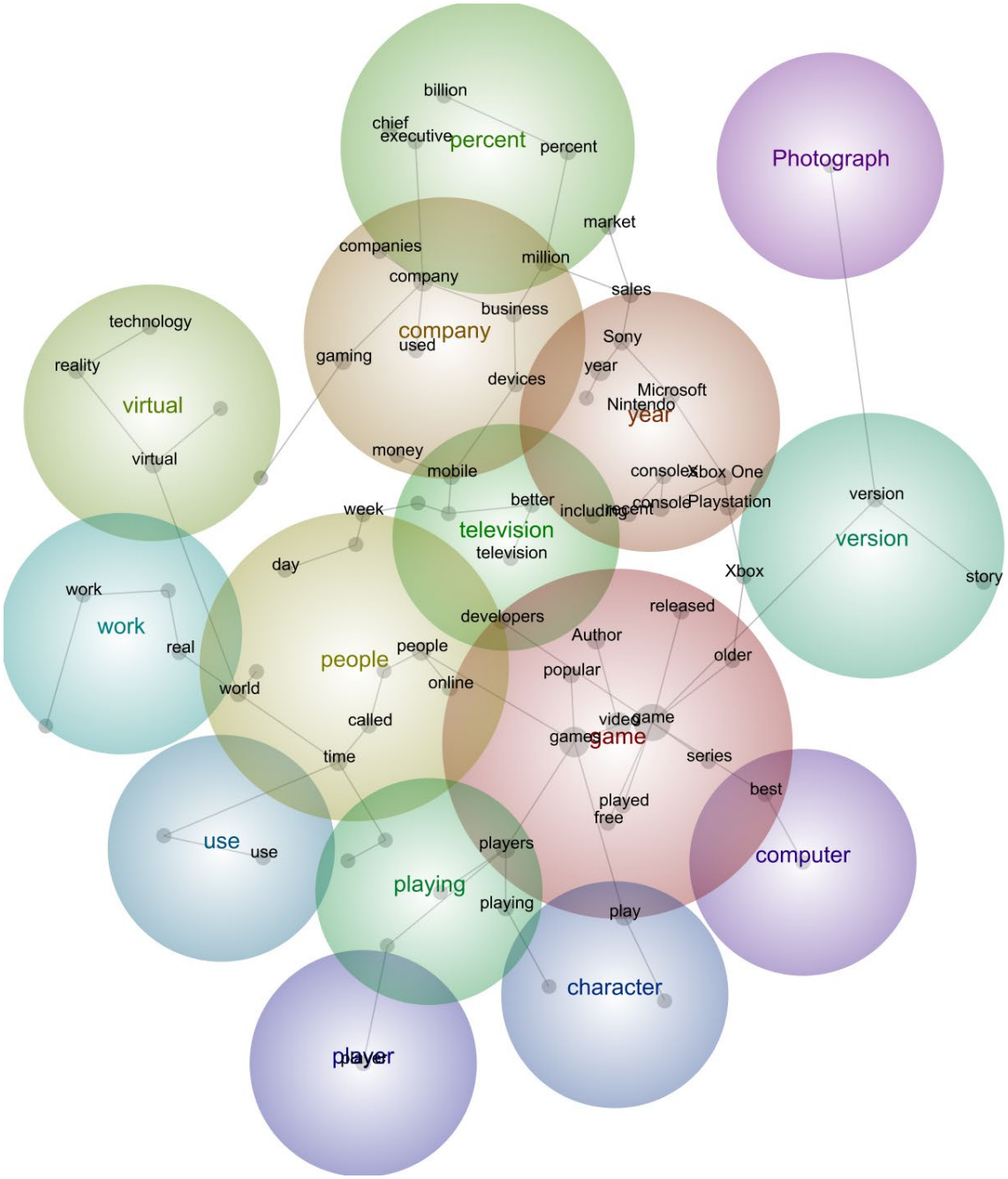


Figure A1 Leximancer concept map for the *New York Times* (US)

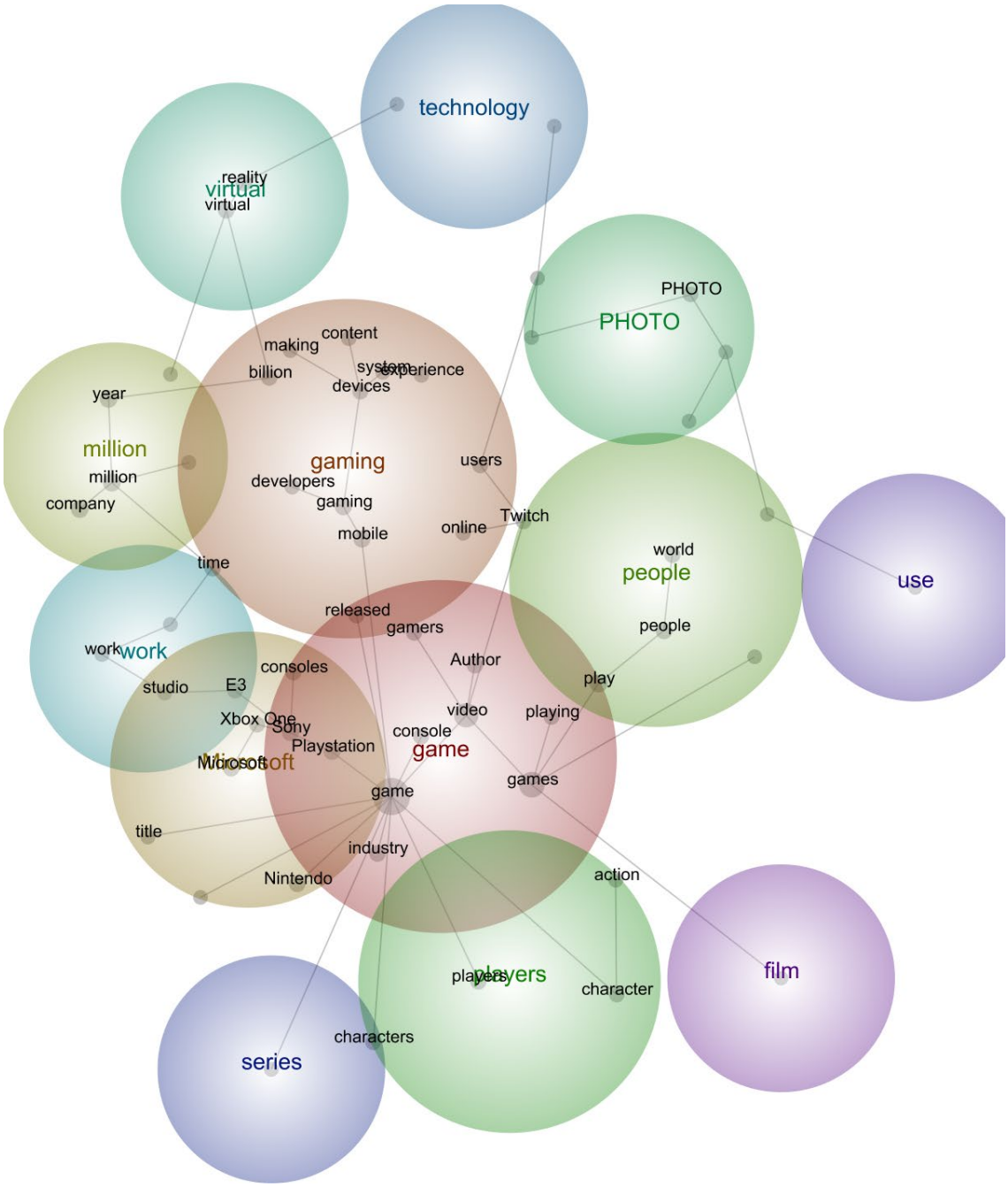


Figure A2 Leximancer concept map for the *Los Angeles Times* (US)

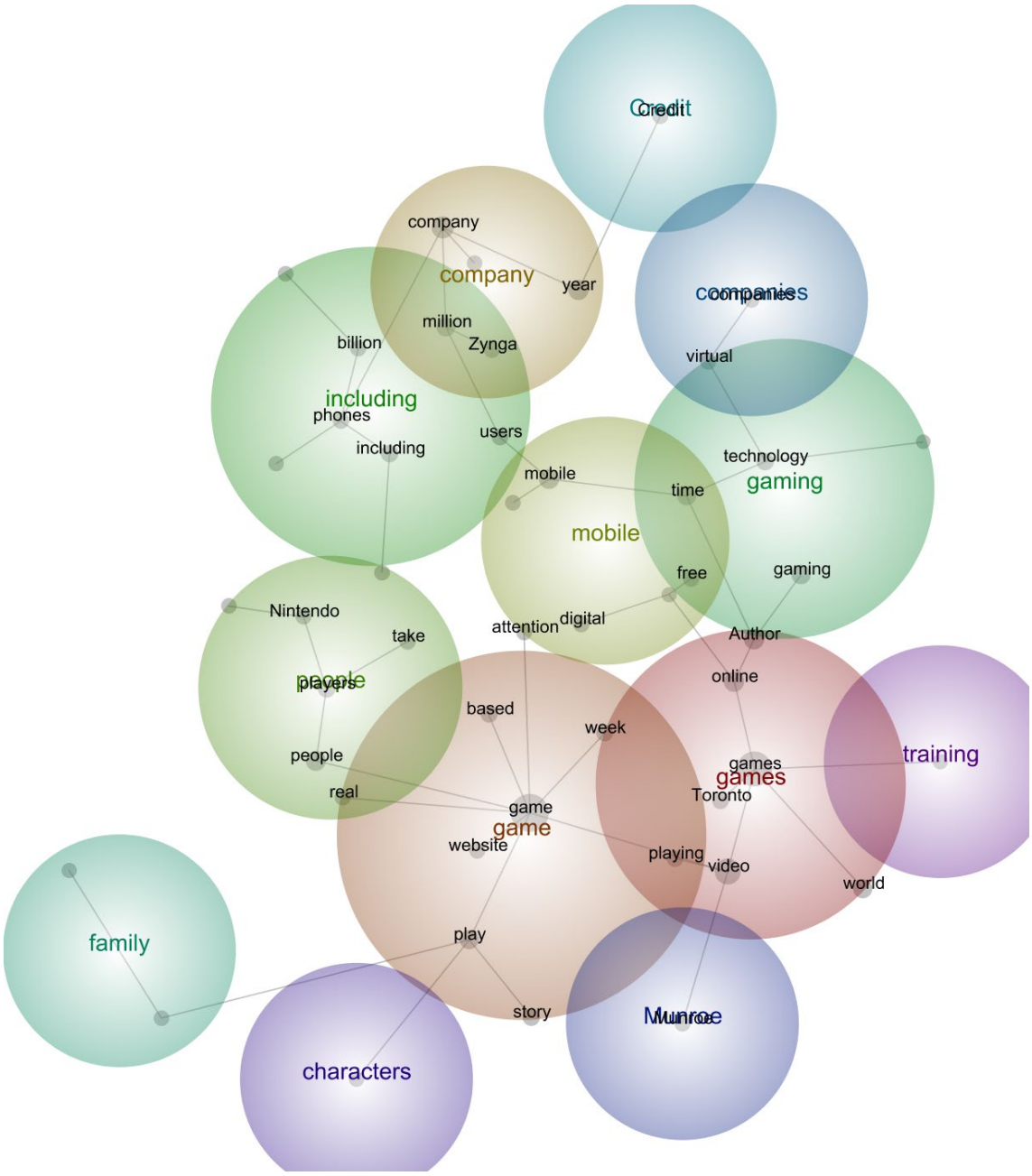


Figure A3 Leximancer concept map for the *Toronto Star* (Can)

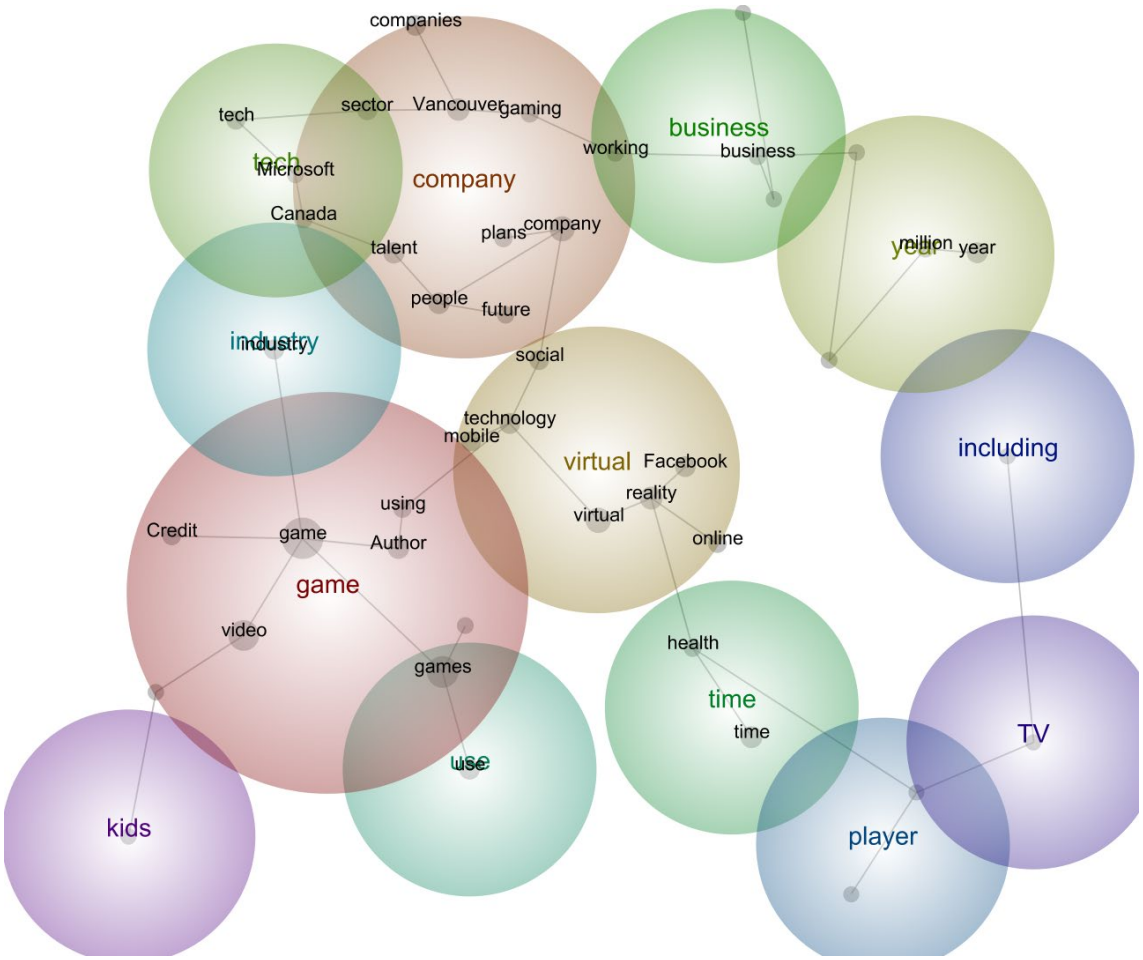


Figure A4 Leximancer concept map for the *Vancouver Sun* (Can)

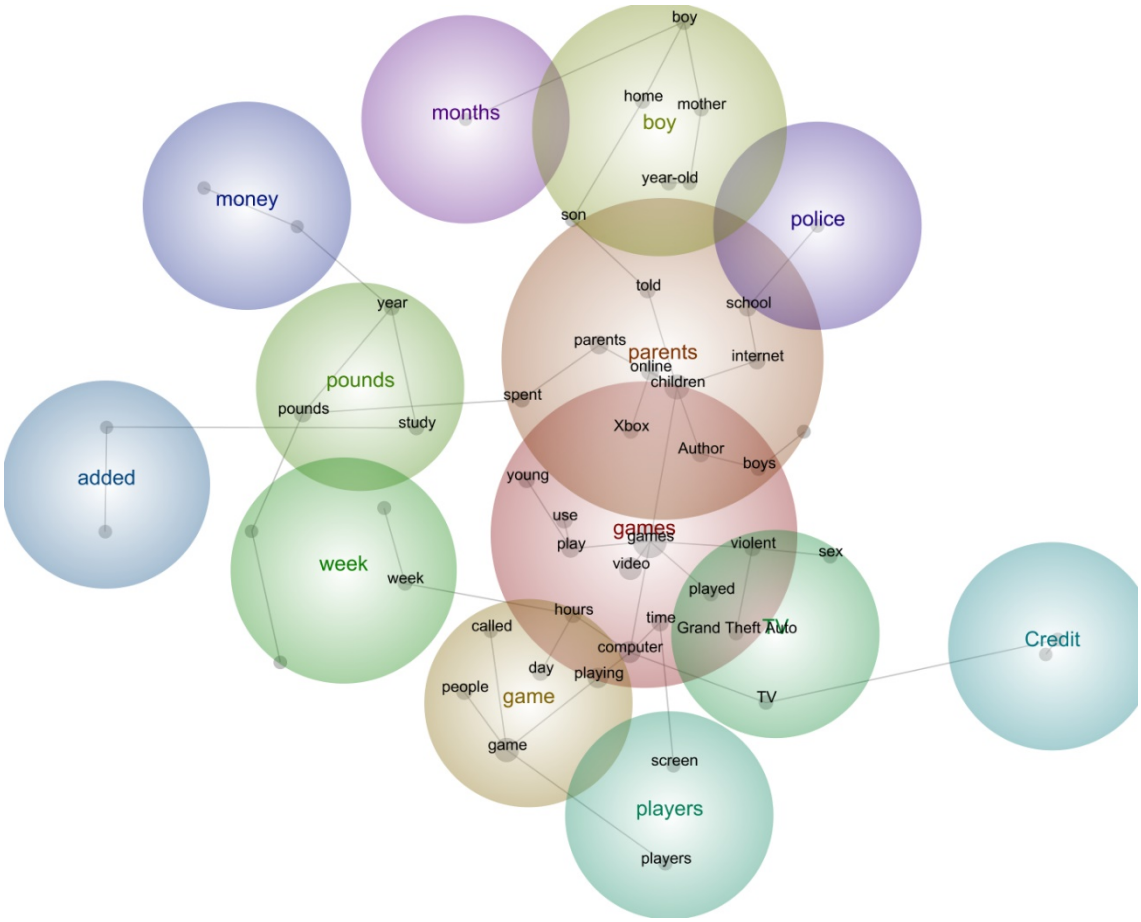


Figure A5 Leximancer concept map for the *Daily Mail* (UK)

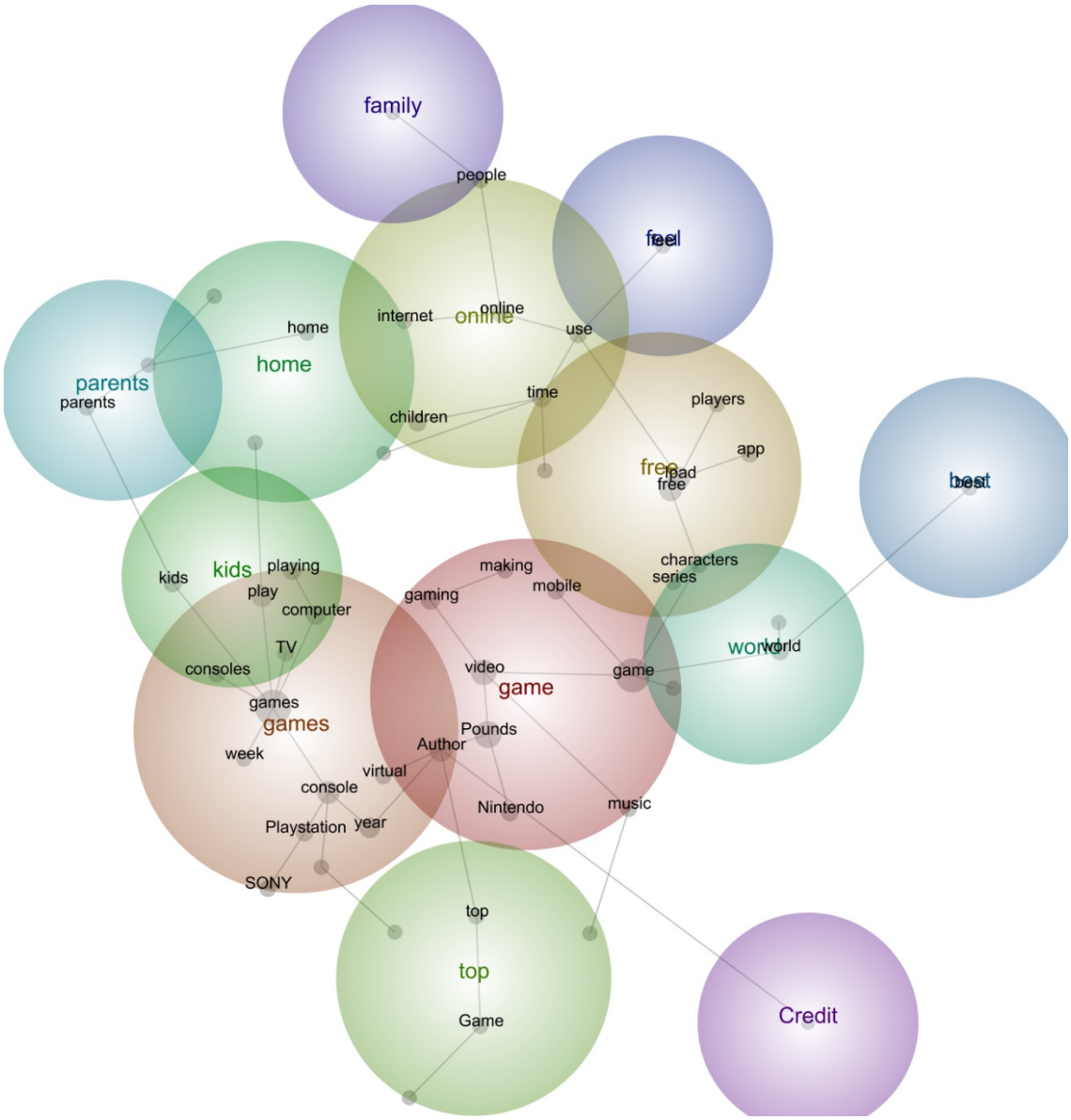


Figure A6 Leximancer concept map for *The Sun* (UK)

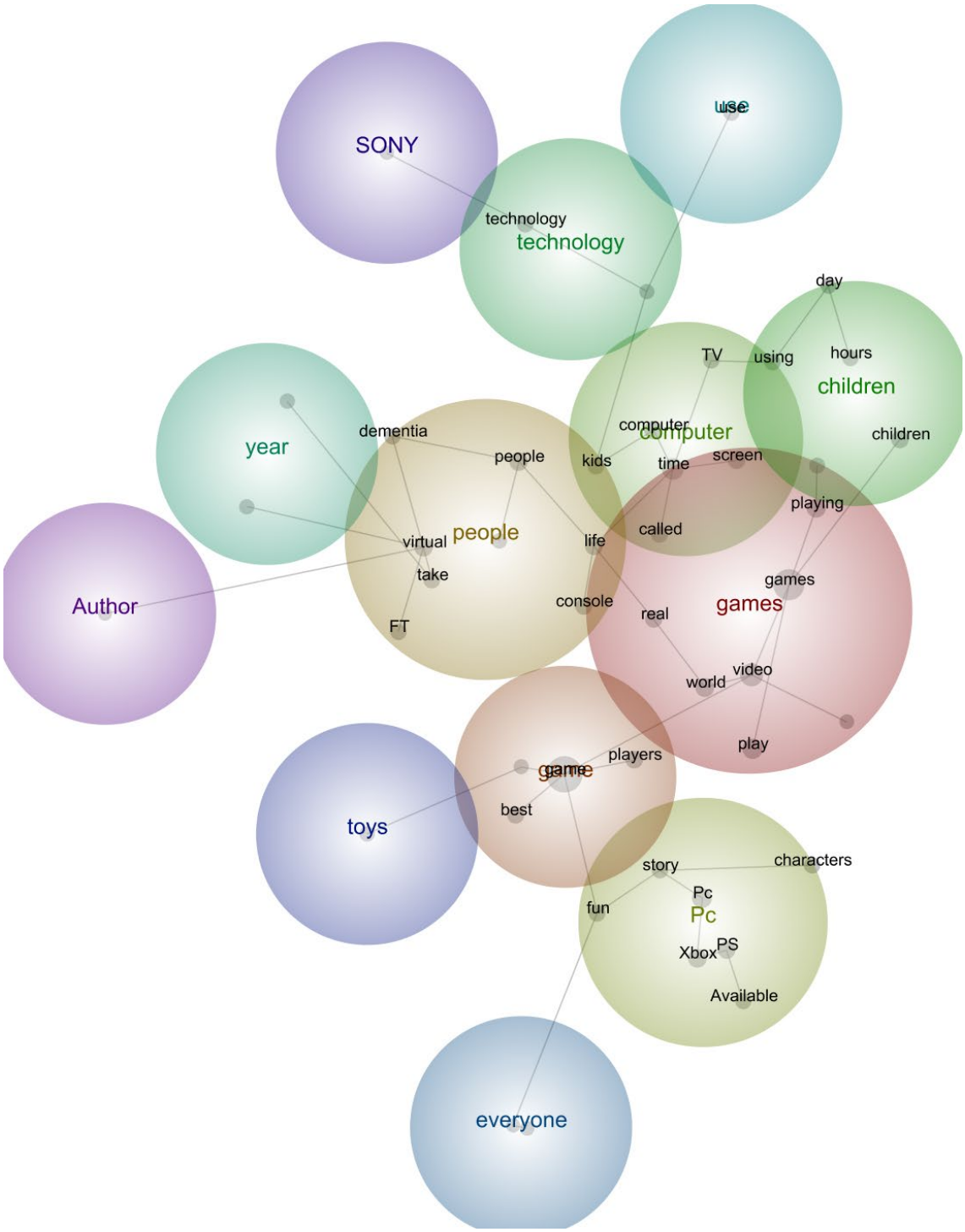


Figure A7 Leximancer concept map for the *Herald Sun* (Aus)

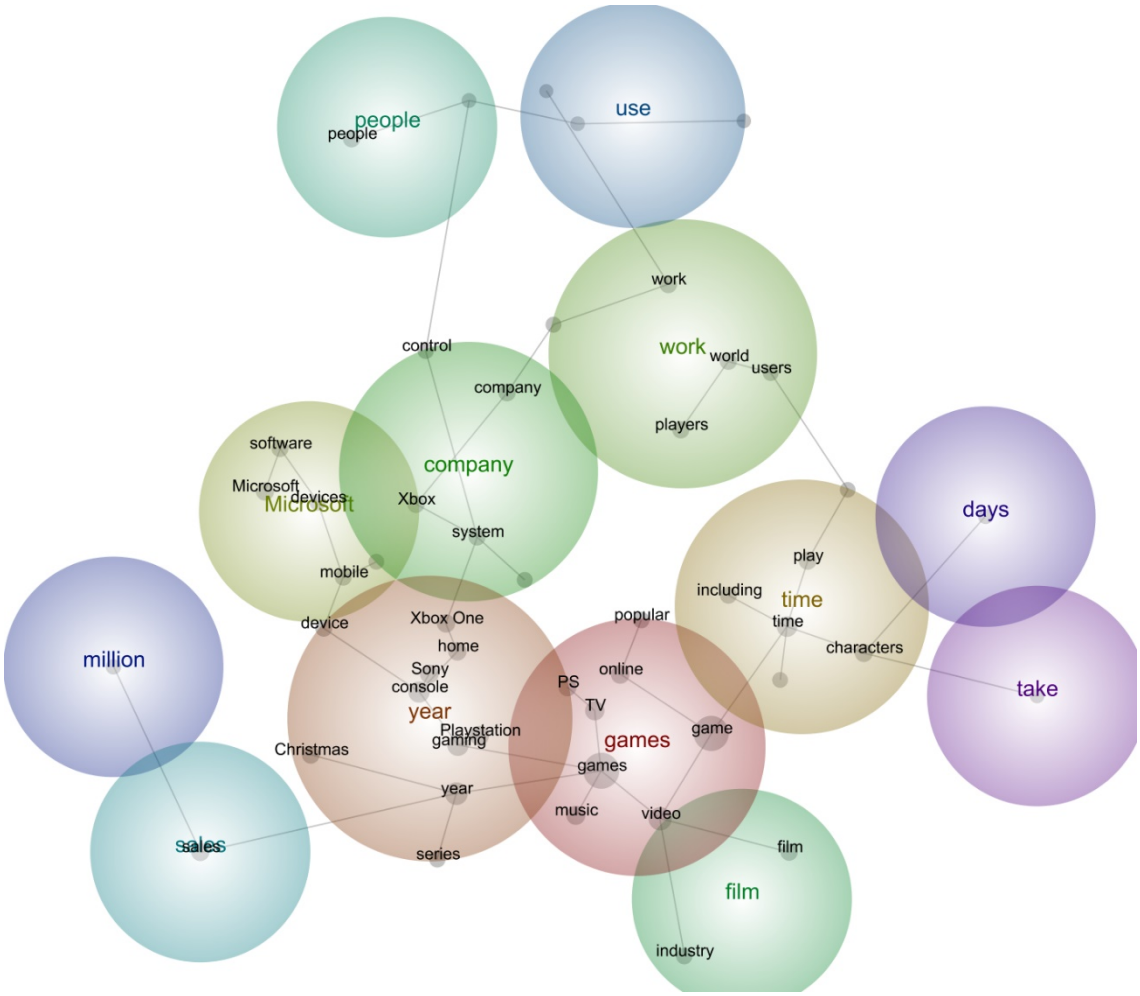


Figure A8 Leximancer concept map for the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Aus)

Appendix B—Leximancer concept maps for enthusiast game websites

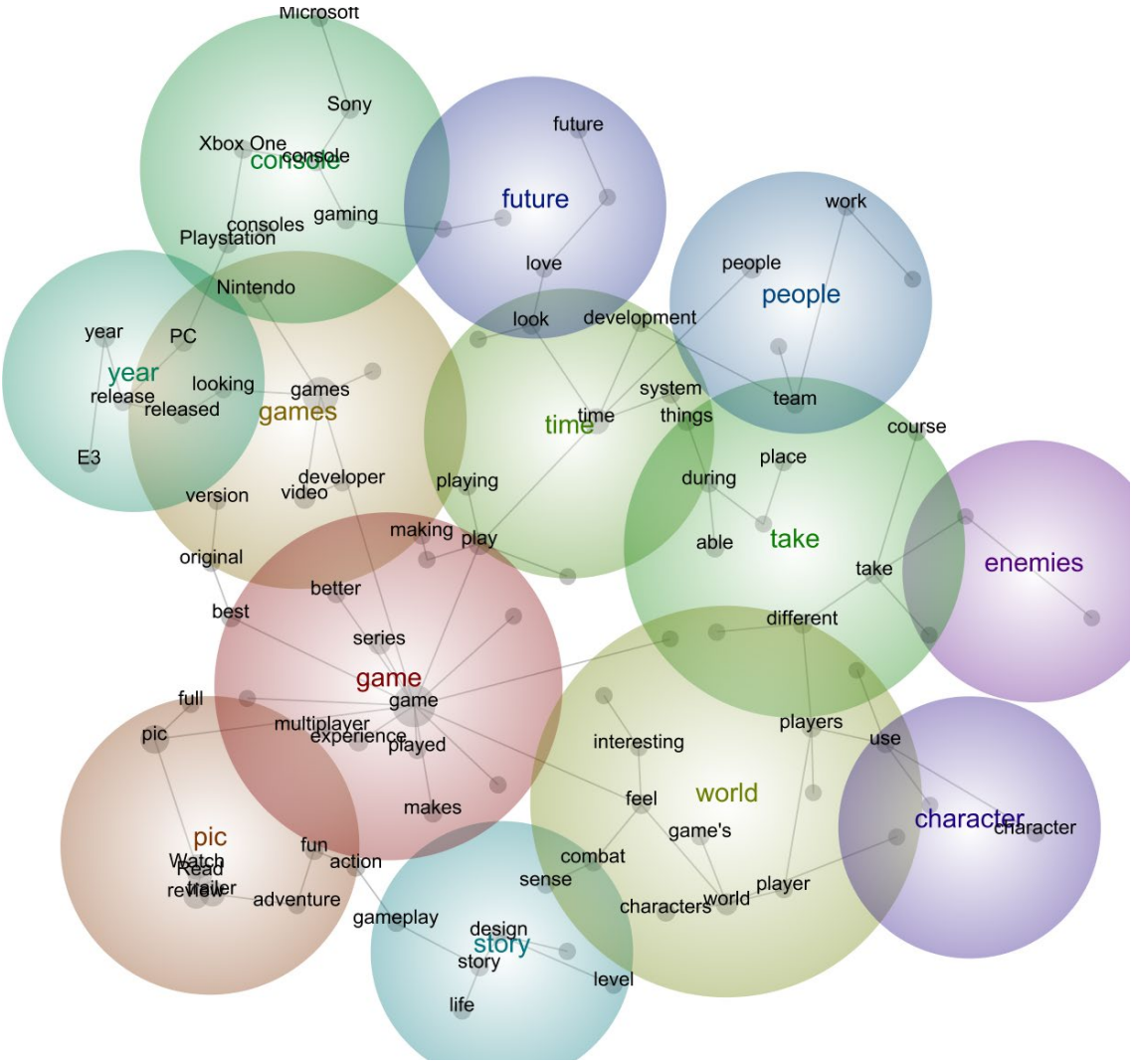


Figure B1 Leximancer concept map for *Gamespot* (US)

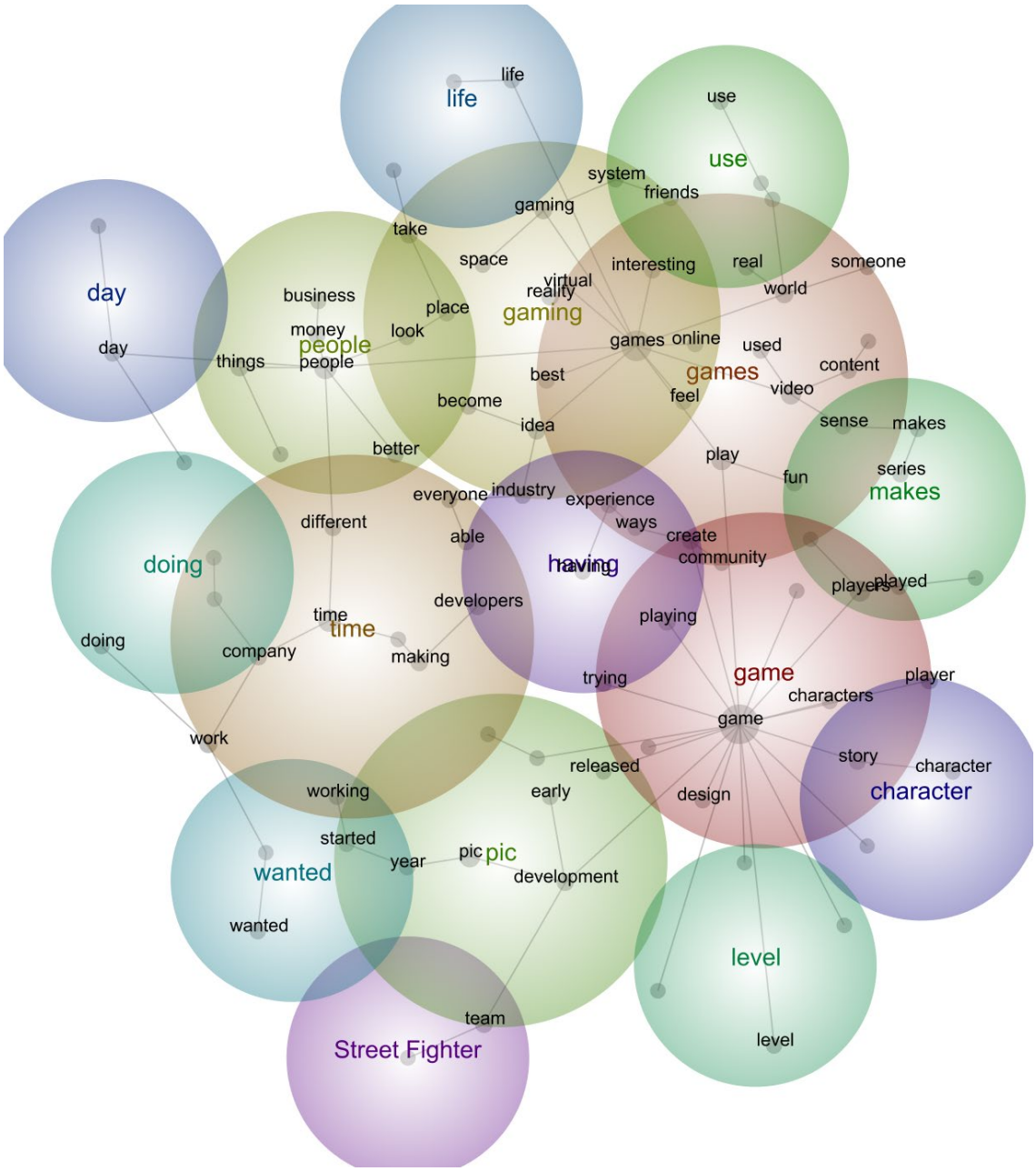


Figure B2 Leximancer concept map for *Polygon* (US)

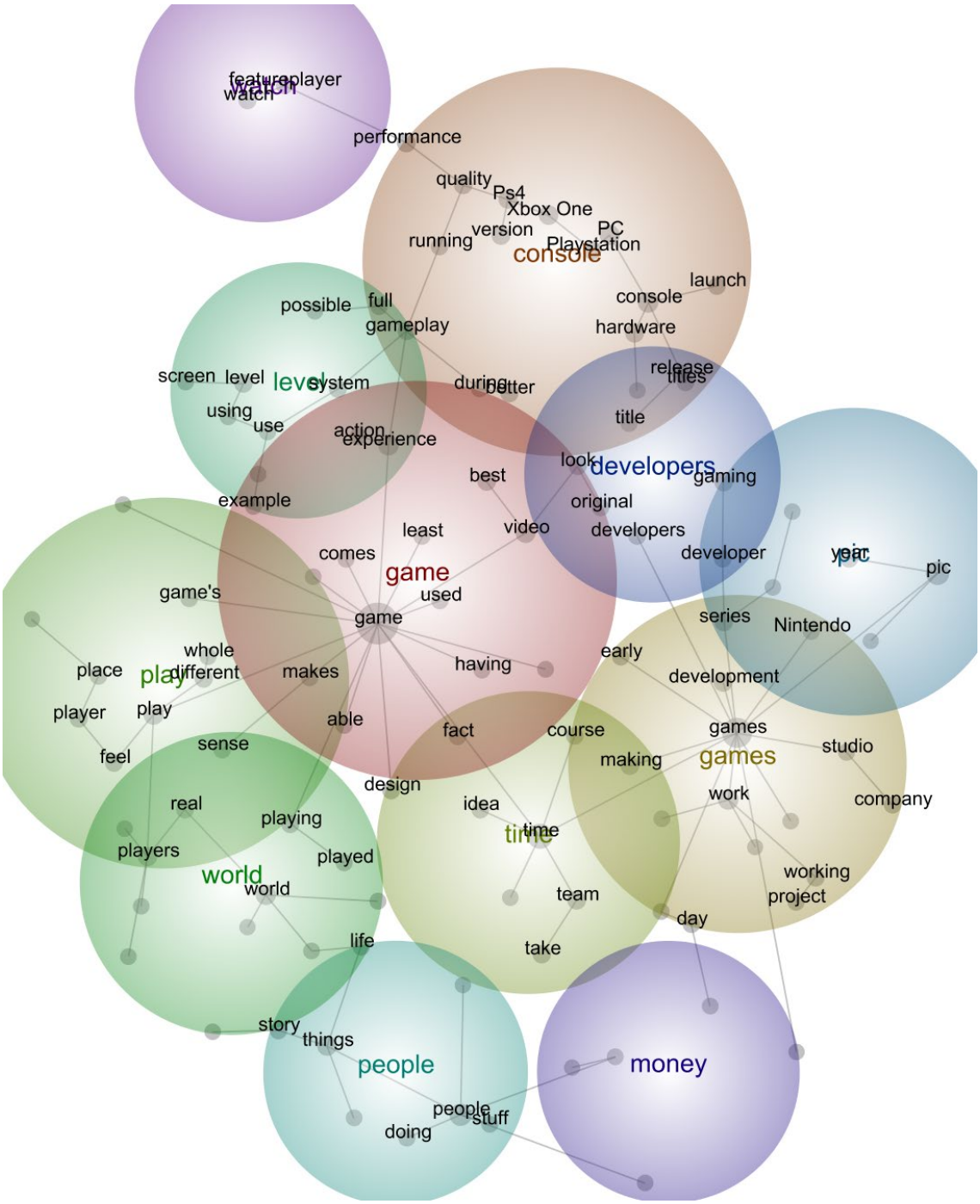


Figure B3 Leximancer concept map for *Eurogamer* (UK)

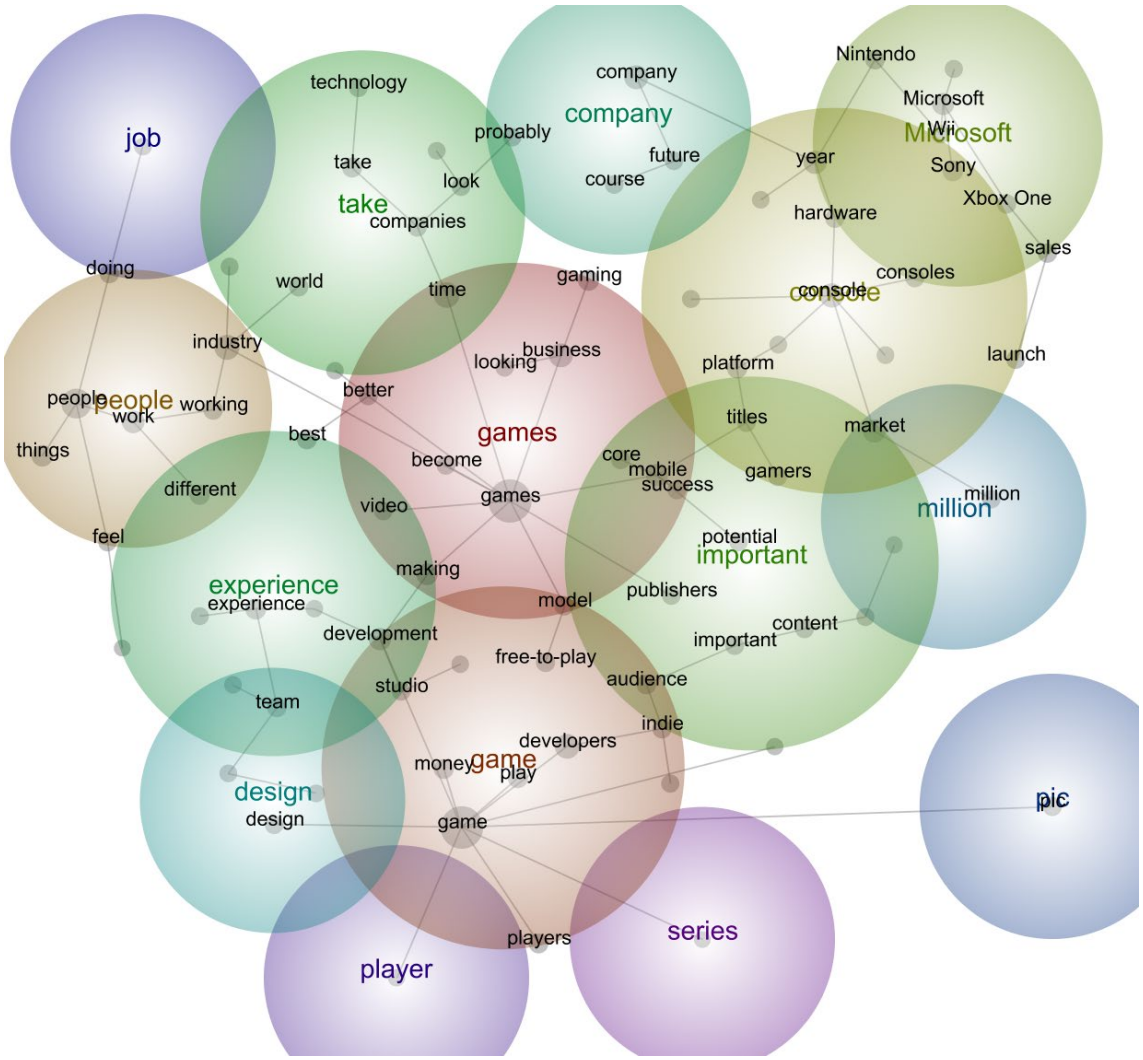


Figure B4 Leximancer concept map for *GamesIndustry.biz* (UK)