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Gamer Identity and Social Class: An Analysis of Barcelona Teenagers' Discourses on Videogame Culture and Gaming Practices

JÚLIA VILASÍS-PAMOS
ÓLIVER PÉREZ-LATORRE
Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Spain

This article examines the role played by social class in the construction of gamer identity among teenagers. Studying gamer identity from the perspective of social class is relevant because it is underexplored in academic research while successive global crises are generating large social inequalities, with young people as one of the groups most affected. Methodologically, this research is based on two qualitative questionnaires and four focus groups with 24 in-school teenagers aged 14 and 15 from Barcelona, Spain. The findings show that social class is important for understanding videoludic practices and the medium's role in teenagers' socialization processes. Thus, sociocultural background affects the perception and construction of the gamer identity as well as the aspirations that teenagers may have in relation to video games as a possible path for their professional future.

Keywords: gamer identity, social class, gender, teenagers, professionalization

Video games have been widely consumed among young people since their popularization in the 1980s, and their consumption has increased in recent years, particularly during and after the COVID-19 crisis (Jakob, 2021). In Spain, the study area of this article, video games are part of the media diet of nine of every 10 teenagers (Calderón & Gómez, 2022). However, beyond these figures, from a sociocultural point of view, the most relevant question is how video games and gamer culture affect young people's identity construction and socialization dynamics. In recent years there has been a diversification of "gamer identities" linked to different, emerging social practices around the medium (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). At the same time, feminist and LGTBIQA+ players have questioned the traditional conception of gamer identity as linked to masculinity and heterosexuality (Thornham, 2011). These two factors (emergent gamer identities and increasing social criticism of the traditional gamer identity by "alternative" gamers) have made the study of contemporary gaming culture far more complex. At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities in many Western countries, with notable consequences regarding the digital divide, especially among vulnerable school-age groups (Gelber, Castillo, Alarcón, Treviño, & Escribano, 2021). It has been confirmed that social class is an essential element that influences young people's relationship with technology and their perception of it (Hollingworth, Mansaray, Allen, & Rose, 2011).

Júlia Vilasís-Pamos: julia.vilasis@upf.edu
Óliver Pérez-Latorre: oliver.perez@upf.edu
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Undoubtedly, these socio-technological inequalities need to be factored in when teenagers' construction of their gamer identity is analyzed.

This is especially relevant in Spain, given that video games make up a large part of the media diet of Spanish teenagers. Moreover, young people have been one of the groups most affected by the economic crisis of 2008 in this country (Arce, 2020). According to the National Statistics Institute of Spain (2022), unemployment of the youth (people younger than 25 years old) reached 30.18% during the first trimester of 2022, and the average since 2008 has been 40.45%.[1] Specifically in Barcelona, one of the most segregated cities in the country, there are large (and increasing) differences among neighborhoods in terms of education levels[2] and professional situations (Blanco & Nel·lo, 2018).

The precarious labor market situation in Spain has been accompanied by an increase in entrepreneurial aspirations related to platform work, especially in the gaming world (Calderón & Gómez, 2022). The emergence of "gamer celebrities" through platforms like YouTube and Twitch is linked to new aspirational alternatives for young people, particularly appealing among those with fewer conventional opportunities (Guarriello, 2019).

The allure of these new (semi)professional practices is particularly relevant in Spain due to the aforementioned contextual reasons (Aran-Ramspott, Fedele, & Tarragó, 2018). According to Calderón & Gómez (2022), one in three young Spaniards (11–24 years old) would like to be an influencer. E-sports are also becoming increasingly popular in Spain and are related to this trend of new platform work (Kelly, Schuler, & Johnson, 2021).[3]

Thus, the relationship between the formation of young people's gamer identity and their social class becomes a matter of particular interest that has not yet been thoroughly explored in academic research. This article aims to contribute to the understanding of the construction of gamer identity among teenagers, focusing on differences related to social class and adopting Barcelona as a particularly illustrative study case for this issue.

Gamer Identity

Based on sociological research, Kirkpatrick (2015) established the origins of gamer culture and the seminal gamer identity in the 1980s, attributing a key role to the emergence of the first magazines for video game fans in the United Kingdom. Magazines such as *Zzap64!* and *Computer + Video Games* were different from the "old" magazines for computer enthusiasts as they shifted the focus from technical discourse to

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[1] For more information about the precarious situation of young people in Spain, see the report "Informe Juventud en España 2020" (Youth Report in Spain, 2020) and the work by Pérez et al. (2021).
[2] As an example, two questions included in the questionnaire for teenagers were: Do you play video games? How much time do you spend playing video games? (close-ended questions, with predefined answers from which the participants had to choose one option).
[3] For more information about the gaming professional profiles of the video game industry and the situation of the gaming industry in Spain, see the Spanish Video Game Association (2018) report.

cultural-experiential discourse.[4] They gave value to the gaming experience ("playability") beyond the technical specificities and defined a characteristic imaginary, reflected on the magazine covers, which was linked to adventure and action narrative genres (with problematic edges, such as the abundance of violence and the sexualization of women). Moreover, these magazines promoted an ideal reader-gamer profile associated with a particular way of relating to the medium: Skill and dominant ability in playing games were essential according to the emerging "good gamer" prototype.

However, with the evolution of the sector and the new cultural dynamics that have emerged around video games, this "classic" gamer identity has now lost its centrality, and new, different gamer identities have appeared (Muriel & Crawford, 2018; Vilasís-Pamos & Pires, 2022). Through ethnographic research on video-game fans and professionals, semi-structured interviews, nonparticipant observation, and a self-created blog, Muriel and Crawford (2018) identified five gamer identities in the contemporary video game culture. These identities are not strictly linked to particular types of video games (game consumption) but rather to attitudinal aspects and background cultural tensions in the video-game world:

1. "Hardcore-subcultural." This is the traditional gamer identity (Kirkpatrick, 2015), characterized by a prolonged and intense dedication to video games and a predilection for difficult games with highly competitive dynamics. The video games typically attributed to the hardcore identity belong to the action genre, a common focus of criticism for their violent and/or sexist traits, along with sports video games. This identity seems to be in "crisis": Several interviewees detached themselves from it as if they wanted to avoid being associated with this identity. Those who identify themselves as hardcore gamers state that they feel they are under social pressure and face hostility (Muriel & Crawford, 2018).

2. "Casual." This is a gamer identity that respondents associate with "casual games" (games designed mainly for mobile devices) and a certain attitude: Unlike hardcore gaming, the "casual" attitude involves approaching video games as a form of enjoyable, "light" entertainment for "having a bit of fun." Thus, this gamer profile contrasts with and is detached from the strong competitiveness and intense dedication of time associated with the traditional gamer identity. Muriel and Crawford (2018) also point to internal tensions in the sense that "casual gamers" tend to be perceived as "non-gamers" and to be held in contempt by fans closer to the hardcore identity.[5]

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[4] Specifically, Kirkpatrick (2015) draws on Bourdieu's (2005) notions of "cultural field" and "habitus." The cultural field defines a cultural sphere with certain "internal" rules about issues such as the criteria for valuing works and the dynamics of awarding prestige to authors; aspects that, as we will explain in the next section, are linked to socioeconomic and class factors. Bourdieu (2005) also relates the idea of the cultural field to the concept of habitus, insofar as, essentially, habitus has to do with a certain attitude and way of acting/behaving that the members of a certain field would have internalized to interact in this field according to its own "logic" (in the next section we delve into this concept as well).

[5] Given that women are the majority profile in casual game consumption, behind the disparaging discourses regarding casual play it is possible to perceive a rejection of women as video-game fans (see also, Kowert, Festl, & Quandt, 2014; Muriel, 2018).

3. "Foodie-connoisseur." Gamers as "foodie-connoisseurs" are interested in exploring and discovering diverse dimensions (artistic, cultural, technical, and economic) of the video-game world in depth. At the same time, they are a type of gamers that stands out from the hardcore identity, contemptuously equating mainstream video games (hardcore gamers' favorite titles) with "fast food" (Muriel & Crawford, 2018, pp. 157–158). Thus, it can be deduced that this profile is partly linked to the emergence of indie video games associated with dynamics of cultural distinction (Oliva, 2020a, 2020b; Parker, 2013).

4. "Cultural-intellectual." This gamer identity has certain affinities with the third category. The two distinguishing features of this profile are: (a) a professional or pseudo-professional relationship with the video-game world (such as video-game creator, specialized journalist, or video-game blogger), and (b) a certain critical distance from the medium. Unlike the "foodie-connoisseur," a "cultural-intellectual" gamer does not always self-identify as a gamer and analyzes the medium from a relatively external perspective with a professional and/or intellectualized view (Muriel & Crawford, 2018).

5. "Everyone is a gamer." This last category is based purely on self-identification: According to some respondents, a person is a gamer as long as they consider themselves to be one. It is, therefore, an identity that becomes liquid and fluctuates, depending on the conceptualization of each person (Muriel & Crawford, 2018).

Our study uses these fundamental identities to analyze gamer identity construction among teenagers. Additionally, throughout our analysis, we pay particular attention to social class and gender differences.

There has been very little research specifically on the link between video games and social class, the work by DeVane and Squire (2008) being one of the significant contributions along these lines. These authors analyzed how socially disadvantaged young people aged between 9 and 18 years interpreted the video game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. They divided the participants into focus groups based on their socioeconomic status and school affiliation, concluding that these factors play an important role in understanding the relationship that young people establish with the medium. In terms of gender, a critical rereading of gamer identities from a feminist and an intersectional perspective has emerged in recent years, intensified as a result of discriminatory episodes such as #GamerGate (GG). GG was a cyberbullying campaign that took place in 2014, with a series of threats and verbal attacks on various feminist groups and professionals linked to the video-games world, from creators to journalists and academics. It demonstrated the existence of a core of fans, close to the political far right, who were willing to fiercely defend a supposed "original" video-game culture as well as the characteristics associated with it, such as male dominance and sexism. Thus, GG made visible a toxic gamer culture, which Mortensen (2018) associated with the "hooligan" phenomenon of the football world. Moreover, there is also resistance to the LGTBIQA+ collective from a certain part of gamers (Muriel, 2018). Along these lines, Shaw (2015) analyzed how traditional models of representation marginalize and make some groups invisible in video games for reasons of gender, sexuality, and race.

Cultural Capital and Video Games

This article also applies the social critique of the judgment of taste proposed by Bourdieu (2016) to analyze the gaming practices of young people. Specifically, we address the dispositions of class thought, interpretation, and style through the concepts of field, habitus, and capital.

Bourdieu (2010) understands capital as accumulations of the values of a social (contacts and relationships), cultural (knowledge and forms of representation, tastes, and aesthetic dispositions), and economic (financial resources) nature, which are negotiated in different competitive spaces that Bourdieu (2010) calls fields: Relatively autonomous microcosms, with their own functioning, regulated by their own tacitly imposed laws, principles, and rules (Bourdieu, 2000). Capital accumulation allows mobility and the establishment of power relations within the fields, between dominant (with more capital) and dominated (with less capital) groups. In this way, the accumulations of capital and the positioning within the fields are conditioned by the habitus of each person, which can be defined as an internalized framework of action that translates into dispositions of thought, interpretation, and class style in relation to "being" and "knowing how to be" (Bourdieu, 2016). In turn, taste dispositions depend on the interrelationship of social, cultural, and economic capitals.

Hollingworth et al. (2011) conducted a sociocultural analysis based on Bourdieu's concepts of capital, field, and habitus, analyzing the practices and technological visions of families from different social classes in relation to their support and commitment to their children's education in new technologies. The results show that there is a digital divide correlated with parental cultural capital; that is, there are class differences regarding the technological practices of families and the parent-child relationships surrounding technology. These are differences not only in access to technology but also in their use and the "culturalization" with respect to it. These differences influence the learning and relationships that children (do not) have and (do not) establish with technology.

Within the specific realm of video games, Consalvo (2009) put forward the notion of "gaming capital," which involves gaming skills/expertise, knowledge, social relationships, and how all this can end up shaping a given "reputation" as a gamer (p. 184). In this study, we take Bourdieu's (2010) notion of capital into account, as Consalvo (2009) did regarding her notion of gaming capital but considering and emphasizing social class and gender.

Aspirations and Professionalization Processes

New video-game professions associated with online platforms, such as the YouTuber and streamer professions, emerged in parallel with the financial crisis of 2008. Until then these professions had not been conceived as economically sustainable or recognized possibilities (Guarriello, 2019). Beyond professional or semi-professional practices, YouTube and Twitch have given rise to the emergence of new "celebrity-platform-gamers" and "professional-gamers" of e-sports competitions (Vilasís-Pamos & Pires, 2022), who are aspirational references for young people. Undoubtedly, this phenomenon is closely related to the day-to-day dynamics of gamer identity construction and socialization among teenagers. As Aran-Ramspott and colleagues (2018) point out, YouTubers have become an integral part of youth culture and, at the same time, have become role models for many young people.

In this context, it should be kept in mind that the teenagers who participated in this study are 14 and 15 years old and have therefore lived in a sociopolitical and economic context of crisis and recession. Their imaginaries of the future have consequently normalized precarious conditions associated with flexibility and competitiveness (Urraco & Moreno, 2018). Thus, the aforementioned new game-related professions could be romanticized by many teenagers, who may generate idealized perspectives of them. It should therefore be noted that being a professional gamer can be an attractive option from a lucrative point of view; however, this is only true for video-game celebrities, since, in general, it is a precarious field, both in terms of earnings and worker rights (Guarriello, 2019).

Methodology

The objective of this article is to study how social class intersects with the construction of gamer identity among young people. To do so, this research proposes a qualitative analysis of the construction of gamer identity among teenagers between 14 and 15 years of age in the city of Barcelona. Four focus groups divided by social class and gender were held: (a) working-class girls (WCG); (b) working-class boys (WCB); (c) middle-class girls (MCG); and (d) middle-class boys (MCB).

Before conducting the focus groups, we obtained informed consent from schools, families, and teenagers, all validated by the university's ethics committee. The sample was selected from one public school and one semiprivate school, taking into account the disposable family income per capita[6] of the districts where the schools are located according to data from the Barcelona City Council.

The sampling process was based on two qualitative questionnaires, one for the potential participants (teenagers) and the other one for their parents. These questionnaires were useful for selecting the participants (ruling out teenagers with no interest at all in video games) as well as for refining and confirming the social class of specific participants. Therefore, the questionnaire addressed to parents included questions about their employment situation (Rose & Harrison, 2007) and their education levels. The questionnaire for teenagers received 24 answers, and the one for families received 13 answers.

The focus groups were attended by a total of 24 teenagers (12 boys and 12 girls) from two different schools: A public high school located in the Nou Barris neighborhood, which is mainly working class, and a semiprivate high school located in the Gràcia neighborhood, which is mainly middle class (see Table 1). To maintain the anonymity of the participants, we used pseudonyms throughout the study.

[6] The disposable family income per capita is the weighting of five variables in relation to the city average (100), in this case, Barcelona. The five variables include the income and expenditure capacity of the population: (1) the academic level of the population (measured by the rate of higher graduates); (2) the employment situation (ratio between unemployed population and working-age population); (3) the number of cars in relation to the population; (4) the power of new cars bought by the resident population; and (5) the prices of the secondhand residential market.

Table 1. Sample Selection According to School Type and Location (Neighborhood).

Location	School	Focus Groups	*N*
Nou Barris	Public	WCG	6
		WCB	6
Gràcia	Semiprivate	MCG	6
		MCB	6

Focus groups traditionally have between six and eight participants (Hennink, 2014). In our case, we decided to have six participants with the intention of generating a relaxed atmosphere and achieving the most egalitarian participation possible (Krueger, 2014). Each focus group lasted about 1 hour and 15 minutes and was based on a script of questions that was applied flexibly depending on how the conversations progressed. Some of the questions focused on consumer practices, such as: *What kind of video games do you prefer? Why? Do you know any of these games? What do you think of them?* These last two questions were accompanied by the collage of indie video-game covers shown below (see Figure 1):

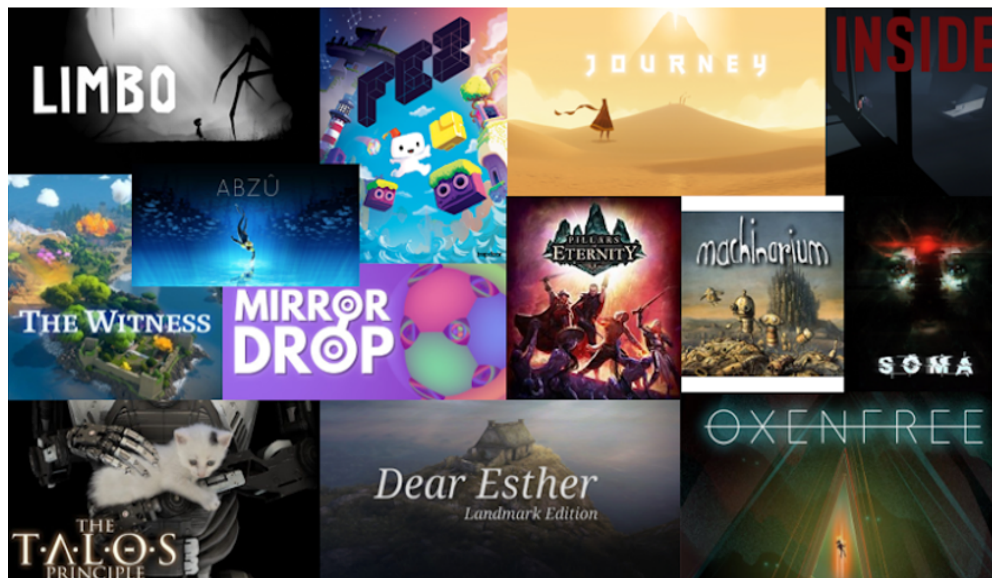

Figure 1. Poster of indie video-game covers used during focus groups. From left to right: Limbo (n.d.), Fez (2019), Journey (n.d.), Inside (2016), The Witness (n.d.), Abzû (n.d.), Mirror Drop (n.d.), Pillars of Eternity (2020), Machinarium (2020), Soma (2015), The Talos Principle (2018), Dear Esther: Landmark Edition (2016), and Oxenfree (2017).

We also asked direct questions about identity, including *Who considers themselves a gamer and why? Who does not consider themselves a gamer? Why?* As well as questions about new professions in the video-game world, such as *Do you consider the worlds of e-sports and YouTube as possible careers for you?* Finally, we explored the participants' views on the video-game industry and their interests in video-game creation, with questions such as *Do you consider video-game creation a possible career path for you?* and others.

The qualitative analysis of the participants' discourses in the focus groups was performed with the NVivo software in two rounds of coding. The first round of coding determined themes around: (1) the teenagers' video-game practices; (2) their discourses on "fun" and cultural legitimation/delegitimization of the medium; (3) their definitions of "gamer" and their identification (or nonidentification) with this concept; and, finally, (4) the teenagers' perceptions about the world of video games as a possible professional horizon, both in terms of e-sports and as professionals of video-game development. Based on the first coding, a second round of coding was performed by crossing the first analysis with the categories mentioned above established by Muriel and Crawford (2018): "Hardcore-subcultural"; "casual"; "foodie-connoisseur"; "cultural-intellectual"; "everyone is a gamer."

Applying Muriel and Crawford's Gamer Identities From a Social Class and Gender Perspective

The gaming profiles of the participants can be described initially by connecting their discourses with the categories (one or more than one) proposed by Muriel and Crawford (2018), plus certain nuances that emerged in particular groups.

Middle-Class Boys (MCB): The Gamer of a "Thousand Faces"

The group of MCB seems to fit into several of the categories proposed by Muriel and Crawford (2018). First, considering consumer practices, we observe that they prefer the action, adventure, role-playing, and shooter genres, which are traditionally associated with the hardcore identity. Furthermore, in accordance with the hardcore gamer profile, they rejected the idea that gaming violence is a notable problem of the medium, arguing against alarmist discourses in this respect.

However, their explanations about why and how to play were quite varied and diverged from the hardcore ethos: They highlighted socialization processes among peers, as well as enjoyment and fun. Moreover, they did not value the dedication of time or competitiveness as key factors for enjoying video games and/or assessing their personal status as a gamer (cf., "gaming capital"; Consalvo, 2009, p. 184). On the contrary, they tended to emphasize the importance of self-control and balance with the rest of their hobbies and responsibilities, placing education and other aspects of social life on a higher level. Moreover, although their favorite game titles could fit into the consumption trends of the hardcore profile, their relationship with the video-game world seems closer to the "casual" gamer category: They conceive playing video games essentially as a recreational and pleasurable activity (Juul, 2010).

At the same time, some participants' discourses resonate with the "foodie-connoisseur" category: Sometimes, they highlighted their interest in discovering and exploring more about video games' narratives through platforms such as YouTube and Twitch. Moreover, all the boys in this group used specific gaming culture jargon throughout their discussion, employing concepts such as "glitches," "bugs," and "hackers," among others. This may indicate that they have specific knowledge acquired through channels other than the experience of playing itself (e.g., by reading specialized magazines, blogs, or the aforementioned video platforms).

Finally, some of the participants also defended the idea of an open and inclusive gamer community, referring to the possibility that everyone who considers themselves a gamer is de facto a gamer ("everyone is a gamer"), so that there are no specific requirements that determine who can or cannot be a gamer (Muriel & Crawford, 2018, pp. 163–167). "I'd say that a gamer is anyone who enjoys playing video games, so I think we'd all be gamers" (Lluc, MCB).

Thus, this group of MCB gathers various traits from different categories of Muriel (2018), forming a "liquid" identity (Bauman, 2011) that we have called "the gamer of a thousand faces."

Middle-Class Girls (MCG): "Casual" Gamers With a Feminist Accent

The group of MCG fits into the definition of the "casual" gamer, according to both their perception of the medium and their consumer practices and preferences. Although they sometimes played Triple-A games, they referred to a wide range of casual games, associating them with occasional and light entertainment.

Like MCB, they mentioned a wide variety of interests (such as sports and social relationships) other than video games. However, unlike the boys, video games do not seem to be such an important priority for them in their socializing processes. In addition, they emphasize the importance of finding a healthy balance between different hobbies and academic responsibilities. This is consistent with the observation of Hollingworth et al. (2011) that middle-class teenagers approach technologies (video games, in this case) through self-discovery and self-management, which generally implies a degree of parental trust.

Besides, it should be noted that one of the participants raised the topic of needing to change the culture and the sexist vision that surrounds video games, from a feminist perspective, a discourse with which the other participants enthusiastically agreed:

> Isabel: We always imagine a boy, and actually . . . anyone could play video games. It could be a boy or a girl
> Rosa: To me, when someone says "gamer" I always imagine a boy . . .
> Isabel: It's instinctive and that's what you think, but it shouldn't be like that, you know what I mean, right? (MCG)

Finally, at a given moment, they talked about violence in video games and about spending time playing them, adopting a critical but constructive perspective: They made mature and thoughtful arguments, problematizing aspects of the medium without invalidating it as a whole. They also criticized other people, mainly close male references, such as certain relatives and friends, for spending an excessive amount of time playing video games, identifying them as gamers.

Working-Class Girls (WCG): "Casual" Gamers, Non-Gamers, and Anti-Gamers

The practices and preferences of WCG seem to fit fundamentally into the "casual" category (they highlight mobile phone video-game titles and play in spare moments). However, the girls of this group did

not consider themselves as gamers, even though they played games with a certain frequency (almost every day). They constantly distanced themselves from the medium, which they referred to as a "pastime," and they could find no clear reason to argue that video games could be a good hobby for them. This contradiction between their frequent videoludic practices and their affective detachment from the medium can be attributed to two complementary reasons: A gender factor and the assumption of the hardcore identity as both a negative and immutable reference.

They usually talked about video games and their gaming practices with shyness and embarrassment, understating their skills and dedication. Therefore, their discourse fits into the "ashamed gamer" category proposed by Vilasís-Pamos and Pires (2022), defined as people who are ashamed to identify themselves as gamers, especially in front of adults, typically because of their (female) gender.

At the same time, unlike the two middle-class groups, the discourse of this group shows that their frame of reference on gamer identity is based on the traditional hardcore category. When they defined a gamer, they emphasized competitiveness, mastery/skill, and dedication of time as key features, thus clearly evoking the hardcore gamer archetype. They distanced themselves from these traits, but at no point did they question whether the hardcore identity was the only way to define what a gamer is (or should be). This tends to (involuntarily) perpetuate the masculinized assumptions about gamer identity. It could also be a reason for the girls' lack of confidence when they talk and give their opinions about video games (Vilasís-Pamos & Pires, 2022):

> Kathya: It's really something that boys do . . . I mean, there are a lot of guys who play video games, I don't know.
> Teresa: Yeah.
> Leila: Because they like it more.
> Tatiana: Yeah . . . I don't know, it's like they play more.
> Kathya: And they know a lot more. (WCG)

This excerpt contrasts with the protest positioning of MCG regarding the gender bias in gaming culture, and shows how the WCG separate themselves from the (traditional) gamer identity and uncritically position boys as the main referent in this sphere. Moreover, the fact that the girls of this group do not claim the gamer identity for themselves (and for girls, in general), unlike the group of MCG, ends up turning their arguments into an anti-gamer discourse. Thus, in conclusion, we characterize the group of WCG as casual gamers, non-gamers, and anti-gamers.

Working-Class Boys (WCB): "Indomitable" Hardcore Gamers (With Low "Gamer Self-Esteem")

Finally, WCB fit very clearly into the "hardcore-subcultural" gamer category, both according to their practices and consumer preferences, and also according to their attitudes toward the medium. Thus, their discourse highlighted individual competitiveness, and they associated spending a great deal of time and acquiring a lot of skill with the "real" gamer identity. They also emphasized survival and violence as positive and educational features of Triple-A games. In addition, the participants in this group praised online gaming as a game mode related to intense group tensions and pressures, which they assumed were necessary for

enjoying video games. In the same vein, at all times they fiercely defended the competitive dynamics among them, which they assumed to be intrinsic to the gamer identity.

Unlike the moderate middle-class discourse, WCB expressed themselves directly and sometimes aggressively when they talked about video games. They were constantly on the defensive against opinions that differed from their own, and they were continually looking for controversy. At no point did they soften their discourse, even though they probably knew that it was not the most accepted among the adult audience. This result is consistent with certain aspects of the work by Skeggs and Wood (2011), in which working-class groups talked openly about their television uses and customs, as opposed to middle-class groups, which tended to be reserved and moderate, highlighting the importance of self-control and responsibility.

Despite spending a lot of time playing video games and entering into highly self-demanding dynamics (as well as demanding of others), which are related to their intense competitiveness, the boys of this group had a negative view of their hobby and associated playing video games with wasting time. They did not ascribe any particular value to video games, except in one isolated instance where video games were seen as a way of escaping their real lives:

> Alberto: The good thing is that you get distracted, and you can disconnect all the time.
> Huang: Yeah! You don't know anything about what's going on outside.
> Aitor: Well, better.
> Cristian: Yeah, that's the truth.
> Alberto: And negative because . . . well the usual, you waste your time [the others nod].
> Alberto: You get too involved, and also as a negative . . . that, sometimes, you take it too seriously.
> Danilo: Yeah, as a personal thing. (WCB)

The argument of "getting distracted" and "disconnecting" from reality evokes the category of "escapist-gamer" proposed by Vilasís-Pamos and Pires (2022), defined as people who play to pass the time and escape their daily routine, a routine presumably more complicated for teens from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

In the following section, we go deeper into the issue of this group's negative perspective of the video-game medium, which can be linked to what we could consider a low self-esteem as gamers.

(Self) Definitions, (De) Legitimation, and Gamer Self-Esteem

In this section, we analyze the participants' perceptions of the video-game medium, considering a continuum between positive (legitimizing) and negative (delegitimizing) arguments. In parallel, we take a closer look into how each group defined what it means to be a gamer and to what extent they self-identified as such.

Starting with the group of WCB, although they had an intense and prolonged dedication to video games, they initially had doubts about whether to self-identify as gamers. Eventually, they self-identified themselves as gamers from a hardcore perspective. Moreover, in line with what we pointed out in the

previous section, paradoxically (considering their aforementioned intense dedication) the boys of this group belittled their hobby, which they called a waste of time and a "bad habit" (Danilo, WCB). In this sense, their discourse resonances with the "old" critical discourse on video games (Kirkpatrick, 2015, pp. 73–100):

> [They start by hesitating . . .]
> Aitor: I [am a gamer] because I spend all day playing and when I'm not playing on the PlayStation, I'm playing on a mobile or laptop.
> Alberto: I'm a gamer because I play for a long time, I mean . . . play.
> Aitor: Yes, you get addicted, and you totally waste your time and sometimes . . . until . . . it's the morning and then suddenly it's already three at night and you haven't done anything during the day . . . only play. (WCB)

If we look at WCG, they also have a disparaging discourse on the medium; however, unlike the group of WCB, they detach themselves from the medium and the gamer identity. In this sense, they uncritically associate the medium and the gamer identity with the masculine gender, as we pointed out earlier (Thornham, 2011). To some extent, this may have something to do with a somewhat out-of-date conception of video-game culture as they ascribe a certain centrality to the hardcore identity although it is questionable whether it currently holds this position in contemporary video-game culture:

> Tatiana: I don't consider myself a gamer because I hardly play, you know? It's not something I like very much.
> Kathya: I don't consider myself a gamer because I know almost nothing about gamers.
> Alicia: The boys are very addicted . . . [Everyone except Claudia laughs and nods.]
> Leila: They spend all day playing . . . because they like it more. (WCG)

Regarding the trivialization and underestimation of the medium by both WCB and WCG, in some parts of their discourse it can be deduced that their families tend to delegitimize the video-game world and criticize and depreciate their children's hobby, associating video games with psychological problems:

> Aitor: They [referring to their parents] think that we're wasting our time.
> Alberto: Wow, it's better not to talk about this!
> Aitor: Well . . . [they'd say we're] gamers or video game freaks
> Cesar: They'll tell you I'm a gamer, that I'm addicted. (WCB)

Therefore, it would seem that working-class teenagers, who, as we have seen, are very critical of their own hobby, partly reproduce their family discourse on video games; a discourse that seems to be linked to old negative views of the medium (a waste of time, a bad habit, and an addiction; Kirkpatrick, 2015). Thus, paradoxically, despite being dedicated fans, working-class teenagers seem to have very low self-esteem as gamers.

In contrast, the middle-class groups, both boys and girls, included legitimizing reasons for their hobby in their discourse. The group of MCB provided reasons such as socializing and learning English:

> Ernest: I'd say we're all gamers here. [The rest nod.]
> Lluc: I would say that gamer is anyone who enjoys playing video games, so I think we're all gamers . . . We have preferences, we look for games that we like, we look for the way we want to have fun, to find the passion in the video game . . . Depending on the game, they're also for socializing. (MCB)

Even when the delicate issue of virtual violence arose, both boys and girls from the middle-class group gave defensive and positive arguments about the medium:

> Isabel: There are things that you can't do in reality and that's why people like it.
> Ariadna: Yeah, there are things that you don't do in real life, but it's like letting off steam. (MCG)
> Ernest: In the end it's just a game.
> Lluís: They're pixels, they're not real.
> Lluc: I think that PEGI standards should be respected. (MCB)

Finally, we observed differences regarding self-identification as gamers. Whereas the MCB defined themselves as gamers without hesitation, MCG and WCB expressed doubt initially: Eventually, WCB self-defined themselves as gamers, whereas MCG adopted a rather distant positioning from the gamer identity. The group of WCG did not hesitate to detach themselves from the gamer identity.

As we mentioned above, the group of MCG, despite adopting a distant position, argued for re-signifying the gamer identity. In this sense, Isabel proposed changing her own perceptions, encouraging her classmates to also change, and giving importance to collective action to address this challenge:

> Isabel: "Everyone" so to speak . . . You imagine someone locked up in their house, but I don't think that it's that extreme either, you know? I mean . . . You don't have to be addicted to a game to be a gamer, because you like it and because you play it for a long time, you know? And, most importantly, what they've said, that we probably always imagine a boy and really anyone can play a video game or be a gamer.
> Rosa: To me, when someone says gamer I always imagine a boy.
> Isabel: It's instinctive and that's what you think, but it shouldn't be like that . . . We need to erase this image. (MCG)

In short, the critical discourse of the working-class groups (both boys and girls) tends to adopt a (self-) destructive tone toward their hobby and the video-game medium. In contrast, the middle-class groups make (more) constructive criticisms of the medium, and pose an inclusive and diverse discourse, arguing for a plural gamer identity and questioning "old" media panic reactions and sensationalist criticisms.

Video-Game Professions, Creative Practices, and Aspirations for the Future

Differences among social classes can also be observed regarding the teenagers' perceptions of the video-game industry, their professional profiles, and also the new professions related to this sector.

Considering this last aspect, both MCB and MCG advocate e-sports and other platforms as new workspaces although they associate success in these areas with rather occasional cases. Thus, they distance themselves from it while viewing their academic responsibilities as a priority:

> Lluís: It is a completely valid profession, but I think that in e-sports you only pay to see the best . . . We don't have enough time to play, like e-sports people, because we go to school and have to do other things.
> Marçal: Yes, it's a very difficult thing. (MCB)

> Ariadna: Very few people get there, it's a very complicated world.
> Isabel: It's very difficult and you have to be very good. (MCG)

Middle-class participants were knowledgeable about the professional pathways offered by the video-game industry, and they also referred to professions with transversal character (programming and animation, among others). At this point, we must highlight a gender bias that is associated with the masculinization of the technological world, as the girls distanced themselves from this type of profession (Taylor, 2012):

> Ernest: Yes, I see myself programming systems in general, not just video games. (MCB)
> Isabel: In general, if you are interested in the video game world, whether it's programming, but also animation, the audiovisual world, and that, then you can also get involved, but I don't see it for me. (MCG)

On the other hand, if we look at the groups of WCB and WCG, we observe that they are derisive of their own professional aspirations and creative practices in relation to video games; they seem to see it as a utopia doomed to failure. They idealize YouTubers and streamers,[7] positioning such jobs/careers as unattainable dreams. In a way, this idealized view of media content creation is underpinned by fashionable mythologies of creative work, romanticizing these unpredictable and insecure "opportunities" as a dream career in which you can get paid for doing what you love (Duffy, 2017). However, they make fun of classmates who show interest in creating content and other related practices, thus approaching digital content creation from an informal perspective.

> Cristian: It's just a dream, nothing more.
> Aitor: You won't get there, trust me . . .you won't get there . . .you won't get there . . . [to be a YouTuber]. He only has his family as followers (. . .) he's a loser!
> Huang: What's your channel called? Candy Crush 2.0. [The rest of the group laughs.] (WCB)

[7] For more information related to the most famous YouTubers and Streamers in Spain, see Scolari and Fraticelli (2019).

The aforementioned idealization of YouTubers and streamers may be problematic in terms of an uncritical acceptance, or even romanticization, of current precarious conditions in the digital world (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018; Duffy, 2017).

Unlike middle-class groups, almost none of the working-class participants (except Aitor and Huang) knew the specific career paths offered by the video-game industry. Behind their utopian and idealizing vision, their discourse is pessimistic and has implicit lumpen resonances: They assume that they live on the margins of society and that they cannot change their situation:

> Aitor: Designing is a job, and you also make a lot of money, but I prefer not to think about the future . . . because I don't know what I'll do tomorrow.
> Cristian: Play! [Everyone laughs.]
> Alberto: Yes . . . everything else is a drag, and I don't know. (WCB)

Finally, if we look at the group of WCG, we identify a gender bias associated with the assumed male domination of the technological world. The WCG position themselves as "watchers," assuming gender inequalities, which are aggravated by class intersectionality (Vilasís-Pamos & Pires, 2022):

> Alice: No, I just watch.
> Teresa: I feel embarrassed.
> Claudia: I haven't even thought about it, I don't know . . . I don't see it as something for me. (WCG)

Thus, the findings of this study show that there is a "videoludic divide," a gap in gaming practices and teenagers' relationship with videogames due to social class and gender, which has clear sociocultural implications, also in relation to professional perspectives, creative practices, and the future prospects of teenagers.

Conclusion

The findings presented above contribute to the understanding of how social class interacts with the construction of gamer identity among young people, focusing on a group of teenagers aged 14 and 15 in the city of Barcelona. Firstly, it could be highlighted that working-class teenagers are anchored in a somewhat outdated gamer identity and view of video games. In this sense, both working-class boys and girls seem to subscribe to the old, hardcore identity, which is being increasingly questioned because of its sexist aspects and the lack of critical thinking toward the medium itself, an "extreme defense" of video games almost in terms of football team fanaticism (Mortensen, 2018). Of particular note is the case of WCB, who, despite their intense and prolonged dedication to the medium, have a depreciating discourse about their hobby and video games in general.

On the other hand, the middle-class groups, in particular boys, are able to use or ascribe to different facets of the gamer identity, with a certain strategic readiness: A hardcore facet, alternating with or nuanced

by the “casual” and “foodie-connoisseur” facets and, occasionally, inclusive discourses in the line of “everyone is a gamer” (Muriel & Crawford, 2018, pp. 163–166).

The WCG distance themselves from video games by falling into an “old” (traditional) criticism of the medium, related to belittling video games as mere entertainment unworthy of attention, a “bad habit” and/or an obsessive/compulsive practice (antisocial gamer stereotype). In addition, it also stands out that they uncritically ascribe the medium to the masculine gender (renouncing the gamer identity). However, the group of MCG made more constructive criticisms of the medium and adopted an activist attitude as some of them proposed a feminist reappropriation of the medium and the gamer identity. It should be noted that since the GG episode, explained above, feminism has been a crucial current in the contemporary culture of video games, which in our study emerges in the reflections of the MCG but not in those of the WCG. This evidences structural inequalities arising from the intersectionality between social class and gender. In the case of the working-class group, we attribute these differences to a lack of cultural capital about video games: In the absence of more up-to-date knowledge about the video-game culture, it is likely that they tend to reproduce older/traditional discourses about video games that have been resonating for longer in the public discourse.

We also observed differences among groups regarding their knowledge and perceptions of video games as an avenue of professional activity: While MCB and MCG (especially the former) know about and consider professions related to the video-game industry and adopt a certain critical distance from the YouTuber/streamer world, WCB and WCG do not know about the professional paths of the sector and tend to idealize the YouTuber/streamer world. In addition, regarding the video game as a lever to stimulate creativity and learning, beyond entertainment, we have observed derisive dynamics among WCB, in the sense that they discouraged and ridiculed a boy who is interested in content creation, and who explained that he has his own YouTube channel.

Taken together, all these differences in the perception of and relationship with the medium give clear evidence of cultural inequality in terms of a “videoludic divide.” Thus, our study suggests, in contrast to the rather optimistic theories about young people’s informal literacy in digital media (e.g., Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2017), that the opportunity of video gaming to be a potential entry point into digital culture for young working-class people and a potential factor of cultural equalization is currently not being taken up. One of the “causes” that can be intuited from this study is the cultural inequality of parents and relatives, which is also related to socioeconomic inequalities. According to the teenagers’ discourses, while middle-class parents and relatives would have some knowledge and a constructive attitude toward video games, working-class parents and relatives seem to have less knowledge of the medium and a negative, trivializing discourse. This contemptuous discourse, as we have seen, seems to be largely reproduced by the working-class teenagers.

All of this leads us to a reflection on the role played by educational institutions, related to formal education, and their function of promoting social/cultural equality: It is currently an important and urgent challenge for high schools to become more involved in fostering equal cultural-critical training in video games to bridge the “videoludic divide.” The challenge of “ludoliteracy” (Zagal, 2010) needs to be taken up again, with an emphasis on cultural-critical literacy and social equality. It could adopt a social approach along the lines that Buckingham (2013) and other experts in media education previously promoted in relation to television and pre-digital media, and thus bring game studies to schools and high schools. In

short, cultural literacy measures should be established to minimize the "videoludic divide" that we have detected in this study.

Finally, regarding the limitations of this study, it must be noted that it is a concrete analysis of a given group of teenagers in Barcelona. Thus, the findings are not statistically representative and cannot be extrapolated. However, a qualitative study like this one can provide interesting insights into young people's discourses and cultural dynamics surrounding video games. We, therefore, hope that this study sheds some light on this issue and contributes to paving the way for further research into this relevant and so far under-researched object of study.

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