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## Abstract

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# Discourse of Gaming: A Conceptual Framework of Gaming as an Interpretive Community

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## ABSTRACT

Situating gaming as a cultural practice aimed at constructing issues of power through cultural discussions necessitates a framework of discourse of gaming to explain how meanings around gaming practice develop. Built on the premise that gaming offers multimodal opportunities for interaction, we introduce the discourse of gaming framework to connect processes of boundary work, definition making, and legitimization to the activities of gaming, the gamer's identity, and the consequences of gaming. Through a survey of Reddit gaming fan communities, discourse of gaming here reflects the power perceived outsiders (e.g., journalists, academics, and politicians) have on shaping the discourse.

## Introduction

Discourse regarding gaming operates within the gaming community and shapes gaming as a practice relevant for interpreting the world of gaming and its members' identities. This illustrates a metadiscourse in gaming that we conceptualize in this manuscript as a *discourse of gaming*. Metadiscourse is a self-reflective discussion; in this case, *discourse of gaming* would reflect gamers talking about gaming. Discourses of gaming operate with mechanisms to clarify, deconstruct, and debate broader societal concerns. Taken from this standpoint hot button issues often take center stage because actors outside of gaming communities amplify those issues. For instance, the gaming community's online discourse over the topic of violent gaming effects serves a two-fold function that considers personal taste in content but also speaks to the issue of gamer identity.



Such discourse is reflected through three distinctive genres: in-game communication, or *chatter*, through gaming journalism, and through social media.

The discourse of gaming presents differences from other forms of fan community metadiscourse with two primary distinctions: (1) the context in which the discourse occurs – actors outside of gaming continually seek to define and shape the community – and (2) the nature of the discursive response – discourse of gaming operates across numerous discursive genres and with distinctive discursive mechanisms.

This manuscript seeks to extend the line of metadiscursive conceptual discussion to gaming. While not attached to democratic ideals or science, the gaming community undertakes a similar process through its conversation. This dialogue operates as an interpretation of society and a gamer's role within it; it takes part as a result of the cultural context in which it appears. Topics of discourse concerning societal problems, we argue, generate active conversation by actors within the community as well as actors outside of it. In this manuscript, we selected a topic of recurrent debate both within and outside the gaming community, the effects of violent video games. To generate data, we asked a sample of gamers to share their perceptions of gaming within a popular forum for the gaming fan community. To illustrate the utility of discourse of gaming, we apply the data to the concept in order to provide grounded evidence for the elements of discourse of gaming. Finally, we consider the research that this concept can generate. In the next section, we will begin shaping this conceptual framework through a synthesis of prior literature on the topic.

## Discourse of Gaming

This manuscript considers discourse as the utterance, the symbols uttered, and also the symbol or utterance as assembled emergently with respect to multiple current and past contexts (Steinkühler, 2006). It is a function, that enables “groups of signs to exist” and “rules or forms to become manifest” (Foucault, 1972, p. 99). More succinctly, discourse “embues reality with meaning” (Ruiz, 2009, para. 3) and connects to the historical, cultural contexts in which it appears (Foucault, 1972). Discourse does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a . . . number of procedures” (Foucault, 1981, p. 52). For Foucault (1972, 1981), discourse reflected an essential manner with which to understand power in that discourse is produced through the power of a social order; power which defines the rules for legitimating knowledge.

Dutton et al. (2011) noted that “rather than a fixed set of outcomes or effects . . . the internet offers a variety of affordances and constraints, which shape but do not completely determine how fans can use these technologies”



in order to create discourse (p. 298). Dutton et al. (2011) further note that while the discourse of gaming produces shared responses, “particular types of audiences, response capabilities and histories that allow for different expressions” (p. 299). Hence, this concept proposes three discourse genres in which discourse of gaming occurs.

The richly social gaming environment is robust and discourse of gaming occurs through three genres. Many gamers make use of various hardware to play games, and also expand on the play experience to interact with one another via *in-game chat* as available through specific games. Another genre of discourse occurs through *gaming journalism*, a space where communities can share about these play experiences. Finally, they interact through *social media communication channels* such as Twitch, Discord, online forums, and message boards. By spanning these genres, the discourse of gaming does not solely focus on the practice of gaming; individuals extend the play space, using various communication channels to discursively construct boundaries, legitimate practices, and the acceptable identities of a gamer.

### **Discourse Genres**

The first and most obvious space for discourse of gaming is through in-game communication, sometimes referred to as *chat*, that occurs through verbal or text-based messaging systems in multiplayer games. The game system does not explicitly point discourse in a direction but the narrative architecture “does establish a determined ‘game area’ with borders that delimit what can happen in the game, which is very relevant for the discourse” (Pérez Latorre, 2015, p. 419). For example, in Perreault (2015), a religious-group used in-game *chat* as a means with which to reflect not just on the game, but on their personal lives and their faith. That said, the discourse was shaped in many ways by the fact that it was embedded within the game; hence, the ways the group enacted care for one another often occurred in relation to in-game activities (Ward, 2015).

The second genre in which discourse of gaming occurs is through gaming journalism, given that this discourse is “bound with the identity of a gamer” (Foxman & Nieborg, 2016, p. 4). Foxman and Nieborg (2016) note that gaming journalists have historically privileged close contact with their audience, more so even than critics for legacy news outlets. This is perhaps because of the degree of “gray” between journalist and enthusiast in this field given that “Gaming journalists, like cultural journalists, generally tend toward apathy in conceptualizing their own profession and tend to focus on their specialized knowledge as opposed to adherence to professional standards” (G. Perreault & Vos, 2020, p. 171).

The interaction of gamers on social media constitutes the final genre of this discourse. Algorithms and in-house moderating teams shape the communicative practices of online fan communities. In an example of this



discourse in fan communities, McKernan (2021) demonstrated the ways in which the game *Papers, Please* spurred discussion on immigration in gaming forums. *Papers, Please* puts the player in the perspective of an immigration officer who must efficiently assess the legitimacy of an immigrant's case. In McKernan's (2019) study, most posters on the forum perceived immigrants as *victims* as opposed to *threats*. In short, the gamer identity presented here was largely sympathetic to a pressing social issue made salient by the game content, but discursively engaged with others via social media. It is perhaps worth noting at this point, which all of these genres of discourse are digital in nature – and operate primarily through the internet.

### **Discourse Mechanisms**

The concept of metadiscourse as we introduce it here is not unique to gaming. In his synthesis of several theoretical models of journalism–paradigm repair, boundary work, and journalism as an interpretive community – Carlson (2015) methodically showcases the interpretive processes that journalists undertake when discoursing their practices, values, and institution. Journalists, Carlson (2015) argues, offer definitions of their field as well as topics central to their daily work–truth and news. Carlson (2015) extends similar arguments made by Starr (1982) contextualizing the development of the practice of medicine within the larger legitimating process of the field. The medical community has sought to signify their role as “rightful arbiter of health” (Carlson, 2015, p. 349) through metadiscourse.

The discourse of gaming operates with three mechanisms. The first of those, *boundary work*, has powerful discursive implications and we draw on the concept of boundary work in fan communities to explicate this mechanism. In as much as boundaries work to *keep others out*, they also delimit and identify who is *invited in* (Kananovich & Perreault, 2021). Research within the fan community discourse genre has focused on the GamerGate controversy, which was “a hashtag ‘movement’ spawned by individuals purportedly frustrated by a perceived lack of ethics within gaming journalism” yet started a “campaign of systematic harassment of female and minority game developers, journalists, and critics and their allies” (Massanari, 2017, p. 330). In this particular case, the discourse of gaming reflected a sort of “political desire” (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 216) characterized by hate-oriented rhetoric. The GamerGate controversy represents an old issue – identity debates – reshaped by current events – the clash of ethics over identities – and is able to emerge in new dimensions as a result of the affordances of new technology spaces (G. P. Perreault & Vos, 2018).

The *identity* mechanism in discourse of gaming concerns how one engages the medium.



This mechanism operates through distinguishing the *gamer* from the *nongamer*, which – as Chess et al. (2017) reflects, relies on a cultural archetype of a white, male *gamer*. This perhaps reflects the lack of representation of members of marginalized communities in video games, which Shaw (2014) argues is connected to the degree to which those members ascribed to the *gamer* identity. Similarly, gender identity (Cote, 2020) and even the amount of time spent playing (De Grove et al., 2015) affect the degree to which individuals discursively describe themselves within this identity. This mechanism emerged alongside the development of home consoles with players self-categorizing as core players rather than casual players (Chess & Paul, 2019). Some (i.e., core players) have used this distinction to exclude others (i.e., casual players) from the *gamer* identity by drawing boundaries about which practices of gaming privy one to that title.

The third mechanism of discourse of gaming occurs through the *defensive legitimization* of gaming. Indeed, scholarly arguments legitimizing the making/playing/studying of games have considered their properties: artistic – gaming as an artistic practice like dance or music (Parker, 2018), social – gaming as a form of interaction between people as opposed as an isolating activity (Williams, 2003), and simulative – gaming as approximations of other activities (Castronova & Falk, 2009). A similar, though less formal, discourse of boundary work, definition-making, and legitimization takes place among some in fan-oriented gaming spaces. In mobile game subreddits, for example, players often distinguish themselves as *free-to-play* (F2P), *minnows*, or *whales* – an indication of how much money they pay in order to progress in the *gamer* (Tham & Perreault, 2021). The boundary work delineates the expectations of players performance in game and reflects “culturally engrained understandings” within the subreddit community (Tham & Perreault, 2021, p. 9).

All of this together indicates the essentially messy nature of discourse of gaming. Recognizing these mechanisms within discourse of gaming allows for the identification of *othering* practices in gaming that work to affirm a White, male, heterosexual, able identity engendered by early gaming journalism and gaming marketing (Cote, 2018; Foxman & Nieborg, 2016). Another theme implicit in the discourse mechanisms is an innately social view of gaming. Contemporary gamers use various means (i.e., multimodal channels, such as face-to-face during tandem gameplay, voice chat during online gameplay, asynchronous message boards, Twitch streams) to facilitate richly social gaming environments. Individuals who conceive of themselves as part of this social group should feel connected to others in the group based on attributes those inside of the group share and those outside the group do not (Tajfel, 1978).

With respect to the discourse of gaming, this degree of self-awareness on the part of the gaming community puts it in line with communities of medicine (Starr, 1982) and journalism (Carlson, 2015) that are often required to reflect on actions, behaviors, and values.



## Method

To illustrate the application of discourse of gaming, we situated the current study within the discourse genre of social media. Specifically, we invited users on gaming-oriented Reddit forums (i.e., subreddits) to discuss a number of topics related to gaming in an open-ended fashion. Adult users ( $n= 427$ ) provided responses to at least one of our questions.<sup>1</sup> We elected to recruit via Reddit because gamers use this platform to discuss gaming topics. Specifically, we are demonstrating the nature of discourse within one portion of the gaming community – namely, one comprised largely of younger, White, male players who frequently play violent video games (see Table 1). The Reddit sample, in other words, has benefit of circumscribing attention to a specific audience (Proferes et al., 2021) that tends to reflect the most devoted or “hardcore” gamers; however, this also means, conversely, that there will be less reflection of causal gamer communities reflected in the dialogue (Bergstrom & Poor, 2021).

The individuals studied here are likely to be savvy on perceptions of their group (i.e., gamers). Consequently, we anticipated that they would likely perceive us as outsiders to the practice of gaming and demonstrate reactance toward the potential that we would stigmatize them. Indeed, in the data, many gamers used violent content in games as a touchstone to articulate appropriate gaming practices, define gaming, defend the gaming community, and identify those they perceive as outsiders. In the data, many gamers seemed to read an implied accusation of *gaming causing violence* in our questions even prior to receiving our prompts regarding violent content.<sup>2</sup> They used this as a touchstone to articulate appropriate gaming practices, define gaming, defend the gaming community, and identify those they believe to be outsiders.

The discourse of gaming occurs in several contexts, such as through *social media communication channels* (i.e., Reddit) where we identified fan communities. The topic we chose, video game portrayals of violence and gaming violence effects, is, certainly, a topic of interest and concern for many parties including those that bridge gaming and non-gaming communities (e.g., academics). After approval through our Institutional Review Boards, we reached out to fan communities through Reddit in order to distribute our survey. The survey’s first page detailed an informed consent that participants had to consent to in order to proceed.

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<sup>1</sup>A total of 754 individuals consented and began the study, but many did not provide qualitative responses or did not make progress beyond consenting to be in the study. All individuals received participant numbers.

<sup>2</sup>Respondents reacted this way to the first questions on the interview questionnaire, which were “For you, what makes for a great gaming experience?” and “How do you think games affect you personally?”.

**Table 1.** Self-reported demographics of participants.

Variable	% of 427	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Cronbach's alpha</i>
Gamer Identity		2.17–6.42	4.42	0.83	0.82
Age		18–52 years	26.7	6.52	
Play video games they perceive as violent					
Yes	89				
No	4.9				
Did not respond to prompt	6.1				
Sex					
Female	9.4				
Male	72.4				
Undisclosed	18.3				
Race					
Asian (Eastern)	10.8				
Asian (Southern)	3.3				
Black/African descent	2.6				
Hispanic/Latino/a/x	9.6				
Indigenous/Native American	1.6				
Middle Eastern/Arab descent	0.9				
Pacific Islander	0.5				
White/European descent	57.6				
Other	3.7				
Income					
Less than \$25,000	22				
\$25,001 – \$50,000	21.8				
\$50,001 – \$75,000	16.2				
\$75,001 – \$100,000	9.1				
More than \$100,000	8.7				
Undisclosed	22.2				
Education					
Some high school	3.5				
High school diploma or GED	24.1				
Associates degree	8				
Bachelors degree	21.5				
Technical degree or certificate	4.9				
Graduate degree	11.2				
Other	7.7				
Undisclosed	19				

We assessed gamer identity using Vermeulen, Bauwel, & Van Looy's (2017) social identity measure, which captures three dimensions of social identity (i.e., centrality, in-group appraisal, and in-group ties) on a 1–7 scale. Higher values indicate stronger identities as gamers

In the survey, we prompted discussion through a series of questions in order to focus responses toward a topic that otherwise appears in small doses in many places within the gaming community (Jansen, 2010). The questionnaire took approximately 25 minutes to complete for most respondents and, as a part of a larger study, included a mixture of questions that were both quantitatively and qualitatively oriented. The current manuscript applies the qualitative responses to the questionnaire. Respondents ( $n = 427$ ) were asked to respond to open-ended questions, starting with broader questions on their gaming experience and what they believe the effects of games are on themselves and others; those led to more specific questions about their attitudes. We asked the participants if they played





violent video games and to describe the nature of the violence in their own words. We then asked them to describe whether they believed the violence affects them and how it did, or why it did not, as appropriate. In exchange for participation, respondents who completed the survey were given the option to enter themselves into a drawing for a gift card.

Coding of responses to open-ended questions occurred in six phases, following the Nowell et al.'s (2017) structure for ensuring trustworthiness in thematic analysis. In phase 1, the first author individually conducted open coding of the responses, breaking up data into smaller units by relying on a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researchers discussed individual findings with each other (phase 2) and, in phase 3, made detailed notes regarding "development and hierarchies of concepts and themes" (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 4). In phase 4, the researchers grouped the themes into categories. In phase 5, the team relied on selective coding to group the categories found in the initial coding session into major themes and placing those within the discursive context (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 10). Finally, for phase 6, individual quotes were selected in order to best represent consensus among the authors regarding the discourse of gaming.

## **Analysis**

Through the lens of Discourse of Gaming, the discourse gathered through the analysis does not stand alone, but rather emerges out of a larger cultural conversation. Gaming has been a fraught activity at least since the advent of the arcade. Indeed, Williams (2003) reflects that in the US, gaming reflects a youth activity that threatened to upend conservative social order in the 1980s – arcades were filled with young people; it was gender, ethnically and racially inclusive. Initially, the concern regarding gaming centered on perceived effects on the brain – reflecting a typical moral panic around new technologies (Williams, 2003). In the early 1990s however, the first-person shooters *Doom*, *Quake*, and *Wolfenstein* shifted the conversation to issues of violence. Societal conversation went so far as to cause U.S. Senate hearings as a result of the depicted violence (Video Violence, 1994). What has ensued from this framing of gaming has been a persistent, largely exogenous clarification of the social identity of the gamer as a transgressive social actor (Kneer & Ward, 2021).

Academic studies on the effects of violent content have found mixed results for a connection between playing violent games and negative effects with some scholars observing evidence of a causal link (e.g., Greitemeyer, 2019). Meta-analytic work in this area has begun clarifying that negative effects of playing violent games likely occur within specific contexts (e.g., Burkhardt & Lenhard, 2022). Yet the discourse produced by academics and journalists who cite these academics rarely captures the nuance of the



scientific study of the phenomenon of violent game effects. Journalists, in an effort to achieve a standard norm of balanced reporting, present each “side” of the debate about violent content effects as equal (Martins et al., 2018). Accordingly, when considering the issue of violent game effects, expert and authoritative discourse from scholars and journalists provide the public with the opportunity to take a stance that may bolster their preexisting beliefs about game effects (Martins et al., 2018) and act in identity-bolstering ways (e.g., increasing gameplay; Kneer & Ward, 2021). It is possible, then, that gamers use these sorts of issues as an organizing structure for centering themselves as the experts on violent game effects and especially so when they are committed players. Nongamers, however, may defer to hierarchical cues of expertise such as affiliation with prestigious universities or media outlets as evidence of superior claims to truth.

Hence, there has long been a divide between *gamers* and *nongamers*, which – as Consalvo and Paul (2019) note – *nongamers* does not always reflect a lack of gameplay. “These are folks derided by many in gamer culture as nonplayers, even as they are playing games for many hours and possibly spending large amounts of money doing so” (p. 7). These *nongamer* gamers are culturally put into contrast with what Cote (2020) describes as core gamers – referential to “the video game industry’s historical attention to male audiences, console games, and masculinized genres” (p. 5). It is into the discussion, of hierarchy and violence in gaming, that the discourse emerged.

Through this coding process, two discursive themes emerged. The first of those was the development of a *hierarchy of gaming* in which respondents conveyed that certain types of gaming were preferable, with gamers presented as standing their ground against social pressure in order to defend it. The second theme delineated *appropriate practices* in gaming. To present these processes, we provide quotes from respondents in order to represent the findings in the words of the respondents themselves. Based on these themes – identified through the discursive mechanisms of discourse of gaming – the discussion will connect the findings with prior literature in order clarify how these findings showcase the gaming community interpreting the world and their individual identities.

### ***Hierarchy of Gaming***

In the hierarchy of gaming, respondents attempted to normatively ossify ideas of which games are preferable within the community. Participants conducted boundary work in order to develop this gaming hierarchy – a process which provided the groundwork for determining what is and is not appropriate in gaming. In this case, gamers clearly articulated that it was important that individuals in their community engage in activities beyond gaming. In short, boundary work was conducted to denote a lower hierarchal value for gamers who represented the “negative



caricature” of the solitary, anti-social gamer stereotype (Shaw, 2010, p. 413). Participants noted that gaming excessively could be too much of a good thing. Respondents at times noted negatively that “I could have been doing it excessively,” according to Participant 168. Participant 182 noted that excessive gaming in his life was spending “an unhealthy amount of time” playing games. This shapes their personal life, as players reported that when they excessively game they “rarely manage to go out and socialize,” according to Participant 100. The reflection by participants—that tended toward the *core* gaming identity (Cote, 2020) – is noteworthy in that typically privileged is a higher amount of time spent in gaming (De Grove et al., 2015). The concern regarding gaming “excessively” would seem to reflect resistance to this aspect of the gamer identity.

Definition making in this case was done through determining what constitutes a “good game” in the discourse of gaming – a discourse that favored intensive, long-form, technology-intensive games and deemphasized casual, mobile gaming. Participants discursively articulated a hierarchy of gaming in which games that require the most investment from the player are preferred and privileged. By extension, this privileging of intensive gaming also speaks to the topic of the gamer identity – participants largely argued that the best gaming requires a challenge that players must meet with the skills and knowledge necessary to surpass that challenge. The participants imply some elitism; the preferred mode requires substantial investment financially (e.g., console or computer) and in terms of time (e.g., casual denotes more accessibility in both platform and ability to play). Participant 30 noted that more valuable gaming included “problem solving” and the ability to “balance being competitive” with working as a part of a team. Participant 71 noted that games need to have “hardcore modes.” This type of gaming, according to Participant 354 “allows you to cathartically get out a clear distinct reward for what effort is required for you.” In a similar manner, the best gaming requires gamers to “train [their] imagination and . . . creativity,” according to Participant 274. Games also made respondents “more analytical and patient” (Participant 243) and a “more efficient multi tasker,” according to Participant 236. Here, this definition of a “good game” through Discourse of Gaming would seem to confirm the hierarchy of games reflected by both Consalvo and Paul (2019) and Cote (2020), particularly noteworthy were response like Participant 71 that even embraced the term *hardcore* to reflect a preferable gaming experience.

In a similar manner, the defensive legitimization in this discourse reflected the lower hierarchical evaluation of casual games. The most privileged “hardcore” and “problem solving” gaming described earlier is presented in contrast to casual games (Participant 71, 30). Respondents described playing casual games, but typically in a defensive, secondary fashion that seemed almost akin to *admitting* they played these games.



They would respond with what they felt great gaming was and, after explaining, then describe a sort of gaming they engaged in that took up substantial time. Most clearly articulated that they did not consider casual gaming to be great gaming, a clear reflection of Consalvo and Paul (2019).

Often the respondents defended this assessment by pointing out deficiencies in the game design, diminishing them in some capacity even when they explained they found the games enjoyable. For example, Participant 279, described “games that have tons to do, with plenty of ongoing updates, usually good gameplay, but may or may not have a great story.” At times they also play because of the inclusion of “grind” (Participant 225, 324); grind, or the repetitive gameplay activities that often account for significant progress in a game, is often considered a controversial element among gamers who often deem a game “good” for including some degree of grind but will deem it “bad” if included in excess. Worth noting, however, is that by design casual (often mobile) games rely heavily on grind – in that these sort of repetitive gameplay activities are easy to play on-the-go. Hence, casual games were discursively deemed less preferable to other games. Casual gamers, by extension, would be seen as existing on a lower rung than those who engage in intensive games (Consalvo & Paul, 2019). When respondents enjoyed casual games, they described them in ways that were defensive, as a second thought, clarifying that these were not their primary mode of gaming.

### *Violence in Gaming*

In the appropriate practices of gaming, the discourse of gaming normatively asserted the practices that belong within the gaming community. Boundary work and defensive legitimization occurred in partnership here with boundary work conducted to indicate violent gaming’s place within the gaming community; defensive legitimization conducted in order to defend it from perceived attack. Participants conducted definition making regarding violent gaming in order to easily facilitate both their boundary work and their defensive legitimization.

Participants conducted boundary work regarding violent gaming, deeming the violence in games acceptable because it was removed from reality in a way that made it less disturbing. “[G]ames lack that kind of realism,” stated Participant 43 who likened violent games to violent cartoons and argued “yes it is violent but the differences between the cartoon and a movie are SO obvious.” Participant 8 elevated the experience of players, suggesting that gamers can “separate virtual actions from real ones” and others noted “[i]t’s fiction, much like the Harry Potter series” (Participant 683); hence, violence in games was framed as a non-issue.



Participants conducted defensive legitimization by diminishing the implications of violent gaming – and this occurred even among participants who thought of the enjoyment of extreme violence as unusual. Participant 579, for instance, offered that “I have a certain mindset, now primarily, my goal is to have fun, now why I have fun ripping demons/people/aliens, etc., apart is not something I completely understand, must be something within the human psyche but I enjoy it.” Furthermore, that violence “is mostly directed to the ‘bad guys’ as a means of defense,” and it serves “the same purpose as in movies or books,” said Participant 276. Participants largely did not see gaming as displaying “violence for violence’s sake,” said Participant 18. This last point – the purpose of violence – also speaks to the definition making regarding violent gaming.

This section detailed the data regarding discourse as it applied to discursive roles regarding boundary work, definition-making and defensive legitimization within the community – these are standard discursive practices in other forms of metacommunication and the data here evidences how they operate within the gaming community. Taken together, these two themes of a delineated hierarchy of gaming and delineated appropriate practices demonstrate why the discussion of violence in gaming plays such a central role. Given the definition making that was conducted for both “games” and “violent gaming,” participants largely identified violent gaming as occurring commonly in the most hierarchically privileged forms of video games. So criticism of violent gaming is not merely an attack on a segment of video games, but triggers defensive legitimization given that it is an attack on some of the most privileged gaming. Yet, this metadiscourse has a meaning beyond just the objects in reference – games and violent gaming – given that they are situated within a broader societal context with which the metadiscourse references.

## Discussion

In this manuscript, we argue that the discursive processes in gaming are used for interpreting the world and an individual’s identity; processes that serve as a mechanism to clarify, deconstruct, and debate societal concerns.

It is first worth noting that respondents reflecting on gaming as a practice with an innate hierarchy; in other words, there were types of games, gaming, and gamers that were preferable. In general, gaming, games than emphasized violence tended to be reflected on as preferable (as did the gamers who played them). Certainly, individual games require different sets of skills – to be put in place via different systems – yet what is shared is the mastery of those skills. It allowed them to speak definitively in responses about what it took to be successful, for instance, in *Resident Evil 2*. Furthermore, they presented specialized knowledge that illustrated their experience with these



game worlds. This included everything from explaining the correct method of making zombie heads explode in *Fist of the North Star* (Participant 106) to how to enact a human extinction event in the *Civilization* games (Participant 299). This specialized knowledge extended beyond the games at times, with respondents making note of their own medical or legal backgrounds. Yet even if respondents lacked a real-world marker of power to cling to, they nevertheless described the power in their gameplay as having value beyond fun, it operates as an “intensely wonderful power fantasy” (Participant 173).

Yet – as noted earlier – individuals within a discourse community have the ability to subvert the dominant expectations of their context. Hence, it is worth noting that a minority of gamers rejected the dominant position of violent gaming, emphasizing the importance of games like Mario that “can calm me down a bit” (Participant 93). One participant noted that such gaming helps him control his Tourette syndrome (Participant 32), while another noted that it helped him “cope with my depression” (Participant 223). Here, the gaming experience empowered them to manage the lack of power they felt in their daily circumstances.

From the context of our literature, this power is an important method of responding to continued societal inquiry (Foucault, 1972). Prior literature has established that gamers have been painted as a scapegoat since gaming entered the mainstream (Williams, 2003) – such attacks reflect classic *othering*, but in this case the gaming community used their own perception of power in order to enact similar attacks on women and minorities (Massanari, 2017). Ironically, these perpetrating groups – largely White males – are the very ones stereotyped for being a part of the gaming community in the first place.

Taken from the perspective of discourse of gaming, participants in the interview dataset responded to concerns about violent gaming before we prompted them to remark about violence in gaming. They also engaged in boundary work and defensive legitimization without our specific call to consider these ideas. For example, in response to the question of “how do games affect you,” one participant wrote directly “video games do not cause violence” (Participant 64) and another wrote, “I know there have been people that say that repeated exposure to violent video games makes people more numb to real life violence, and I strongly disagree” (Participant 339). Our data suggests that violent acts perpetrated by gamers – and the ensuing negative conversation regarding gaming that tends to follow – presents a valuable opportunity within the gaming community. Based on discourse of gaming, these events allow gamers to reify and ossify their discourse regarding gaming and what it means to be a gamer. The discourse of gaming presented here includes a high evaluation of a gamer’s specialized skills and knowledge, and a defensive orientation. This identity is created responsively and designed to place gamers in a discursive position of power – a power not



unlike that which they seek to derive from the games they play (Participant 51, 95, 173, 431). As Participant 51 noted in describing his appreciation for the video game *Tom Clancy's The Division*, "it gives me a sense of empowerment to kill the little fuckers." Similarly, Participant 95 noted that in *Doom* the ability to "dismember demons" and perform "various degrees of mutilation" provides a "form of catharsis" by making the player feel powerful. So, in a sense, the presentation of a discursive threat – a study regarding the effects of gaming – offers gamers the opportunity to discursively play in the way they have practiced. They know that communities–like those targeted by these interviews–present a place where they can "escape from the harshness of the world" (Participant 95) and revel in the shared strength of their resolve in favor of gaming, and against negative discourse regarding their gameplay.

### **Synthesis**

Finally, worth noting is that the hierarchy presented here privileges gaming that tends to be more violent, given not only the types of games described as the best, but also the defensive responses to violent gaming prior to being asked about them. This allows for (1) the presentation of gamers conducting defensive legitimization against attacks on the community – indeed, even to the extent of anticipating attacks – and (2) simultaneously, ensures continued cultural/societal conversation regarding violence in gaming through boundary work and definition making.

### **Applying the Discourse of Gaming**

The analytical value of discourse of gaming developed here stems from how it connects the participatory culture of the gaming community with how gaming and the gamer is understood. Gaming discourse can be understood as a socially embedded cultural practice. Gaming's status as a trivial, hobby-oriented form of communication becomes instead a product of discourses that delimit, legitimate, and critique the practice. As the location in which gaming is imagined, this discourse presents boundaries for the forms gaming can take, how gaming can be understood, what the gamer is expected to be, and what are the acceptable, privileged practices in the community. It is a site where both actors inside the discourse (gamers) and actors outside of it (e.g., politicians and journalists) debate what gaming ought to be through their own presentation of definitions, boundary setting, and legitimacy offering. We argue these processes are central to the import of discourse of gaming and, in the last section, showcased how this operates with a study of gaming fan community discussions surrounding violence in gaming. This section argues for the vitality of discourse of gaming by articulating how it can be used empirically and applied in future research.





Shared understandings related to gaming arise through discursive processes that manifest in both gaming practice and gaming identity articulation. We would argue that the central practices of gaming are inextricable from the articulated meanings of these practices. This proposition can be refined through application to specific research topics. Researchers can apply the framework connecting the gaming discourse processes to examine the meaning-making occurring in the discourse of gaming by looking at the components of what has been said, where it was said, how it was shared, and who said it. Making the discourse of gaming an analytical object requires that researchers develop boundaries of this discourse in order to make it understandable. This strategy would naturally lend itself to case study research (Flyvbjerg, 2006). By focusing on specific cases, the researcher can focus on a set of texts and the discourse surrounding them. This engagement with an incident allows for researchers to contextualize the actions or behavior in question. The texts in question should be analyzed in relation to the speakers, the placement of the text within the larger discursive conversation, and the constraints delimiting the discourse. In contrast, by focusing on the textual production—the producers of the discourse—the researcher is required to engage with the technological, cultural, political, and economic assumptions that might be implicit in the cultural context of the discourse. In the study reflected in this manuscript, we engaged interview respondents about violent video games through a survey of gaming fan communities on Reddit. Hence, we also engage with the culture of gaming amidst the fan communities of Reddit in which this discourse occurs.

Future research is needed to further develop this concept. In particular, there are three areas that deserve attention. First, the participatory culture of gaming is taken for granted. Enthusiast gamers speak across numerous modes of discourse—but how does this shape the discourse? Second, a continual topic of discursive research is on identity formation and we would argue that this is particularly important for gaming given the gender, ideological, and ethnic biases in the assignment of *gamer*. It is worth considering the influencing affect that perceived outsiders such as gaming journalists, academics, and politicians have on shaping the agenda in the discourse of gaming. Based on the data presented here, it seems plausible that gamers are used to operating with an innate defensiveness to their practice.

## Conclusion

The discourse of gaming concept provides an avenue to understand the gamer in a way that necessarily sees their identity as co-created by the actors both inside and outside the discursive community. It allows gamers to be placed within—not distinct from—the culture with which they must respond and how gamers use their media transient, discursive processes to operate as





an interpretive community. What differentiates discourse of gaming from other discourse is (1) the context in which the conversation occurs and (2) the nature of the discursive response. As with journalism (Perreault, 2014), a tug-of-war exists over definitions and values essential to the operation of the groups between actors outside of the fields who seek to conceptualize it in particular ways, and those within it. Gamers must find ways to preserve and iterate gaming in the midst of a context of other communities that do have institutional support. The gaming community accomplishes this by resourcefully and creatively making use of media transient processes to refine and define their identity. As demonstrated in this study, this context and the nature of the response has prepared gamers to respond to certain re-definitions so much so that their objections are offered before the attack is even levied.

We must note that subculture reflected on in this study, Reddit, reflects a particular subculture of gaming (Bergstrom & Poor, 2021; Proferes et al., 2021) and hence may not be reflective of more casual gaming communities where a person “would not describe herself as a gamer” (Vanderhoef, 2013, para. 9).

As Carlson (2015) and Starr (1982) both indicate, a number of communities and fields make use of metadiscourse as way in which to iterate values, practices, and roles. The discourse of gaming concept provides an avenue for understanding a community consistently used to be on the defensive, fighting for the definition of their own identity.

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