

Discussing Identities through Game-Making: A Case Study

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Abstract

Identities should not be understood as a static, defining trait, but as a temporary articulation performed by diverse people. Based on data generated through the *Playing Beowulf* project, in which students produced their own games, I present a reflection on the meaning of a gamer identity and how diverse identities can be performed and articulated during game-making process. Understanding how these identities are orchestrated in a non-professional environment might help to clarify the relationship between them and the social and cultural position occupied by games, as well as to reflect on the validity and possible limits of a gamer identity.

Keywords

identity; gamer; culture; game-making; education

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Introduction: Game-making in educational contexts

It is possible to affirm that game-making has been used as an educational approach since the 1990s, when the first projects started to emerge. These seminal works (e.g. Kafai, 1995) received a strong influence from Seymour Papert's (1980) *constructionism*, which argues that learning can be more meaningful if it happens through the creation (*construction*) of an artefact, such as a digital game.

These seminal projects usually had two main goals: to foster "academic" learning – to teach curriculum-related content, such as Math (Kafai, 1995) – and to foster what Yasmin Kafai (1995) has defined as "technological fluency", competences to deal with digital technologies not only in a "mechanical", non-critical way, but also teaching pupils "[...] how to make things of significance with those [digital] tools and most important, develop new ways of thinking based on use of those tools" (Kafai, 1995, p. 39).

Due to this strong constructionist vein, this first wave of educational game-making had strong bonds with the development of programming skills. However, this link led to the decline of game-making during the late-1990s, when schools progressively lost interest in teaching programming, and substituted software-oriented ICT lessons (Kafai & Burke, 2013).

Nevertheless, since the mid-2000s, we have been seeing a revival of educational game-making, mainly due to the dissemination of several tools – such as Scratch, Alice and MissionMaker – to aid game-making practices, enabling people with different interests and levels of technical skills to produce their own games (Gee & Tran, 2016). Similarly, the recent curricular trend that has defined programming as a desirable "basic skill" in some countries (such as the USA and the UK) also played an important part in this new wave of educational game-making.

This new relevance of programming in educational game-making is easily noticeable. In a recent review of literature on educational game-making, Kafai and Quinn Burke (2015, p. 313) found that "the majority of studies focused on teaching coding and academic content through game making, and that few studies explicitly examined the roles of collaboration and identity in the game making process".

However, while we need to acknowledge the importance of teaching specific "curricular" contents – such as Math or programming – it is also fundamental to recognise that games are an important contemporary cultural form, capable of championing arguments, values and beliefs (Bogost, 2007, p. ix). In this scenario, this project explores how game-making can be approached in terms of culture in educational contexts, in opposition to those traditional studies related to specific curricular content. Considering the pervasiveness of gaming in contemporary societies, being able to engage meaningfully with games (playing,

interpreting and expressing one's own ideas) can be seen as a relevant competence to everyone. Here, I am interested in working with the concept of gaming practices as literacy – an essential set of skills for engaging with contemporary forms of meaning-making ("reading", interpreting and "writing" them) in different spaces, such as educational contexts (Buckingham & Burn, 2007). I am particularly interested in how young people in educational contexts can claim and perform different identities while developing their own games, and how these identities are influenced by and can inform researchers about the alleged "gamer" culture and identity.

In order to explore this topic, this paper can be divided in two main parts. In the first part, I briefly unpack how identity has been approached in Cultural Studies, define how this concept is understood in the scope of this project, and discuss how this idea relates to "gamer" identity and culture. The second part explores an empirical research conducted in a school in London: I will analyse a game produced by two 14 year-old male students, whose participation in the project presents interesting insights into how different identities can be claimed and represented within a game-design process, and how these identities can inform a broader discussion about games as form of self-expression, and about "gamer" culture and identity.

Contextualising Identity

Identity is, as David Buckingham (2008, p. 1) argues, "an ambiguous and slippery term". This ambiguity comes from a paradox: identity, on the one hand, can be related to uniqueness, something that separates oneself from all other people in the world. On the other hand, it can also be referred to as a bond that one has with a group of people: one can speak, for instance, about a "gamer identity". This term would refer to all those people who identify themselves as gamers, and this group would share some values, beliefs and traditions that would define a sense of "gamerness".

This paradox, however, is only the starting point for the hard task of making sense of identities and understanding how they are expressed. This is because, as different authors claim (Giddens, 1991; Hall, 1992; 2000; Canclini, 2001), in the contemporary world – or, as Anthony Giddens defines it, in "late modernity" – identities cannot be regarded as stable, but are in fact fluid, malleable and negotiated.

Giddens (1991) argues that some overarching forces – structures, such as religion, class, gender – that used to define identities are being eroded in the late-modernity age. This process generates a wide range of choices: people are not necessarily limited to the group of responses defined by their own cultural world. This results in a demand for subjects being self-reflexive, constantly analysing their plans, possibilities and decisions. This is why Giddens conceives identities as fluid: since traditions and cultural

practices have less relevance in the modern world, one can challenge and negotiate with social structures, and finally define his or her own identity. However, this coherent narrative, as Pierre Bourdieu (2000) defines it, is an illusion; it is only tentative to organise rationally one's life as a "whole", when it is, in fact, discontinuous and fragmented.

Stuart Hall (1992), when arguing about the fluidness of identities, takes a slightly different path, acknowledging social structural differences, but also highlighting this fluid aspect as the result of a fragmentation of the subject. One is constituted by a conglomerate of identities, which are sometimes contradictory. In this sense, rather than being understood as an "essential self", identities can be seen as social constructs:

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. (Hall, 2000, p. 17)

In this sense, an identity can be perceived as a social construct that offers a temporary position for a connection between our subjectivity and our discourses as social subjects, as subjects who can "be spoken" (Hall, 2000). Identities are embodiments, which we articulate and adopt temporarily (Weber and Mitchell, 2008, p. 41) and, as embodiments, they are, to some extent, representations: they are always produced in relation to the Other, in order to make our discourses intelligible to this Other.

This understanding of identities as representations is relevant to one aspect previously highlighted: identity as a bond with a group. Rather than built around similarities, identities are the result of the differences (Hall, 2000): it makes no sense to speak about a Human identity, as a "humaness", whatever it would be, would be shared by all of us, as humans. However, when someone defines herself a "gamer", she is delimiting a difference, excluding those that do not share the same practices, beliefs and values that she shares with other "gamers".

In this scenario, some authors (e.g. Shaw, 2012; Grooten & Kowert, 2015) defend that the term "gamer" should be understood not as a mere synonym for "player", but as a cultural positioning; thus, in the scope of this paper, "gamer" will be understood as an identity, that is, a specific cultural positioning. Therefore, the person who claims this identity is in fact claiming a connection with the alleged "gamer culture", often expressed through different social practices, such as showing off gaming capital – e.g. talking about games or using pop-cultural references from the gaming world (Consalvo, 2007; Shaw, 2013; Grooten & Kowert, 2015) – and owning specific gaming devices and playing games from specific genres (De Grove et al., 2015).

This cultural positioning as a gamer, nevertheless, is by no means different from other identities in the late modernity: it is also fluid, and can also be only an identitarian fragment claimed temporarily by someone. Being a "gamer" – like any other identity – cannot be understood as an essence, a core aspect of someone, but as a momentary articulation (Shaw, 2014, p. 151).

Hall (1992, p. 303) argues that the late modernity made "identities become detached from specific times, places, histories, and traditions, and appear 'free-floating'". As discussed before, structures that used to stabilise identities in the past, such as languages, religions or nationalities, have lost some of their influence, partially undermined by late-modern processes, such as globalisation and neoliberal rationales (Canclini, 2001, p. 29). In this scenario, at least one new structure has risen to occupy some of the space left by old structures: consumption. Nestor Canclini (ibid) suggests, then, that the citizenship model envisioned by the Enlightenment, based on equality and social participation, is being eroded, and consumption can be one of the few forms of social participation available for several people, transforming citizens into consumers. But what do these processes have to do with gamer identity and gamer culture?

Can anyone be a gamer?

We cannot ignore that the gamer culture is directly related to this shift described by Canclini: to claim a gamer identity is to assume a cultural positioning defined mainly through consumption of a form of media (Shaw, 2012). Moreover, we cannot ignore that the industry, especially during the 1980s, has played a major role in defining who "could" be a gamer, and what one should do to become one (Shaw, 2013).

Nevertheless, I do not believe that the industry – as a structure – has an overarching force subjugating consumers' wills and ideas. In this case, I believe that the best approach to understanding the role of the gaming industry in shaping a "gamer" culture is through Bourdieu's (1984, p. 170) idea of *habitus*. A *habitus* can be understood as an internalisation of societal values, beliefs and ways of thinking that is result of oppression exercised by neither a structure nor the product of individual agency, but created socially in the struggle between structure-agency (overarching forces-individuals). More important, since it is internalised, a *habitus* is often reproduced unconsciously.

Recognising someone as a gamer, thus, might mean not only to acknowledge that one plays videogames, but that this individual has specific bonds with the societal values associated to "traditional gaming culture", such as knowing exactly which games to play – separate "good" games from "bad" ones – and recognising and using gaming references in diverse contexts (Kafai & Burke, 2015). Moreover, as other scholars argue, the term "gamer" is often related to a specific demography: the

young heterosexual male (Shaw, 2013), especially from white or Asian backgrounds (Kafai & Burke, 2015). This link to a specific demography is reflected in diverse research about who identifies herself as a gamer: Adrienne Shaw (2012), in her research regarding feelings and attachment to games, remarks how different interviewees brought up the social negative connotation that the term "gamer" carries. This finding is supported by the study undertaken by Frederik De Grove and colleagues (2015), who found correlations between age, gender and the proud assumption of a gamer identity among high school students (mean age = 16.39): boys tended to identify themselves as gamers more than girls, and youngsters tend to claim a gamer identity more often than older students, as games were perceived as a trivial kids' domain. Andrew Burn (2008), in a study focused on gaming capital with students in the UK, also noticed how girls used to "downplay" their gaming experience, claiming that they would play only games which were seen as girl-friendly, since playing videogames was socially perceived as a male activity. In these cases, even if an identity is less something we "are", and more something we "do" (Canclini, 2001, p. 96), the possibility to subscribe to a gamer identity is not open to everyone.

Challenges to this gap are not only found in academic studies – e.g. Kafai (2008) on gender issues around gaming –, but also through more open pathways, such as Anita Sarkessian's series of videos about feminism and games (Consalvo, 2012) or Anna Anthropy's experience as a trans game developer (Anthropy, 2012). However, these challenges faced intense opposition, especially by those who are already in a hegemonic position inside gamer culture: the series of violent threats against female game developers (Consalvo, 2012) and the #gamergate episode (Chess & Shaw, 2015; 2016) are clear examples of this reactionary movement. Therefore, it seems that those who question issues regarding the lack of diversity or other toxic practices (such as harassment of female players) are seen as mere threats for the dominant-friendly gamer culture. Shira Chess and Shaw (2015; 2016), for instance, described how they and other academics were considered as part of a feminist conspiracy to destroy both videogames and the gaming industry.

At least two aspects can be pointed out as 'reasons' for this violent backlash. First, there is the already cited notion of *habitus*, related to a kind of a naturalisation and unconscious reproduction of societal aspects; in this case, for these privileged gamers, their entitlement is seen as 'natural', and changing this 'nature' would, in their view, destroy the gaming industry and gamer culture as they are.

Second, and more interesting, there is a media-related question: as Shaw (2010) points out, games are always seen as "other" in culture, as something unique, separated from other media, and often from the 'real world'. This relates to Megan Condis' (2015) study about fans' reactions

to homosexual content in two of *Bioware's* games (*Star Wars: The Old Republic* and *Dragon Age II*). As she points out, for several fans, the space employed to discuss the game was "sacred", and should not be "hijacked" to talk about political or other "mundane" issues, as if games were a separate, non-serious space where politics do not have space.

Politics, however, cannot be understood in a narrow sense, as something carried out only by distant politicians in official instances; every action, every word choice is politics. Gaming is not free-floating in a vacuum, and, as some authors point out (e.g. Anthropy, 2012), games are a field for the dissemination of different values and beliefs. Thus, they (and gamer culture) cannot be perceived as a neutral space, but should also be treated as a field for social and political struggles.

And it is through these struggles that the definition of who can be a gamer might be challenged. As discussed before, this identity is based on an artificial convention (a *habitus*), grounded on the consumption of media and, thus, there are diverse means of questioning this convention. Anthropy (2012) argues in favour of a diversification around the games produced: rather than depending on the industry to offer games that might challenge this convention, she claims that games have their creators' values embedded in them, and it is essential that more creators – and therefore, different perspectives – are brought to gamer culture. Shaw, on the other hand, argues in favour of the construction of a critical audience for different games:

More than making games 'for everyone' as the casual revolution (h)as done (Juul, 2010), in some ways I think we need to work harder to make more people 'for games' and in turn feel invested in them as cultural texts. (Shaw, 2013)

In this case, the question of gamer identity relates to creating different games and preparing the audience to deal differently with them – no matter if "personal" games (Anthropy, 2012), independent ones or those produced by the industry.

Achieving these goals is never an easy task, but there are possible pathways, such as game-making workshops with young people – especially if game-making is treated as a form of literacy. In the following section, I will discuss how this kind of initiative can promote reflection upon games as cultural artefacts, while also offering a space for young people to express themselves and perform different identities.

Playing Beowulf: Translating a thousand-year story into a game

Context

This research was carried out during *Playing Beowulf*, a project that promoted engagement with the epic Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf. It was

developed in different contexts in the UK and Australia, and involved participants from diverse groups (secondary, undergraduate and postgraduate students). The participants engaged with the text and with reinterpreting it as a digital game through MissionMaker, software developed to allow non-programmers to create their own 3D games. This paper refers to the module that was part of the British Library's Young Researchers project, organised jointly by the British Library (BL) and the DARE research centre (UCL Institute of Education/Knowledge Lab) in a school in London.

The data referred to here was generated in an after-class program organised by the researchers and two teachers (English and ICT), who recruited students from years 7, 8 and 9 (aged 12-14) willing to take part in the project (total of 6 students). The activities consisted of 6 sessions of one hour each, distributed between the BL (2) and the Learning Centre (LC) adjacent to the school (4). At the BL, students saw the oldest manuscript of the poem, engaged with the story and discussed it in a focus group, led by teachers and researchers. At the LC, students focused on the game production: the activities were always opened by a quick lecture (about 5 minutes) on a relevant topic, such as game design principles or a specific technique regarding the software. Afterwards, they worked on their own games using the computers, and the researchers kept in constant communication with them, asking about their games and their design choices and giving any needed support.

Methods

This was an exploratory qualitative research loosely based on ethnographic methods: I followed closely the participants during all sessions and kept a journal with field notes from our encounters. Aside from these observations and field notes, other researchers and I carried out quick interviews (recorded in audio and video) with the students during the sessions, especially during game production.

Lastly, the games themselves were analysed; after each session held at the LC, I saved one copy of each game produced by each student, in order to be able to analyse, by comparing the last version with the previous one, the progression of their work. These works were also analysed under the lens of the interviews, in order to examine the difference between students' intentions and the actual results they achieved.

In this paper, I will focus my analysis on one specific case: a game produced by two male students from year 9, Evan and Fred¹. Specific reasons led me to choose their case: first, they were the only students who decided to work collaboratively rather than alone, producing a different game-making dynamic; second, both students participated actively in the discussions and showed considerable gaming capital.

¹ Names were changed.

Hence, the game-making process and product provided an interesting illustration of how gamer culture connects to game-making and how “gamer” and other identities are negotiated and performed in this context.

The generated data was analysed through a multimodal framework (Kress, 2010), since it favours the analysis of different modes (e.g. speech, visual representation, ludic) simultaneously, acknowledging that they have affordances and constraints, and that communication often happens through a combination of different modes (e.g. in videogames, through moving images, ludic mode, music, sound).

Making a game through different identities

The analysis of Evan and Fred’s game, even though they were unable to complete it, provided several insights regarding identity expression through both interviews and game versions. Here, I will discuss two specific identities found during this analysis, *proto-professional* and *gamer*, presenting some examples to illustrate how these identities were performed, and how they are not fixed, monolithic blocks, but fluid, temporary articulations.

A first element of Evan and Fred's design process is their incorporation, after exploring and understanding the basics of the software, of a “professional” discourse on game-making, which I have defined as *proto-professional*. After deciding to work in pairs, they opted for dividing the tasks into two fronts: Evan would be responsible for designing the game mechanics and play-related tasks (including programming the game rules using MissionMaker’s simplified coding system), whereas Fred would deal with narrative and aesthetic elements, such as creating game ambience and visual style. This arrangement was also kept when they were talking about their game, as seen during a quick interview at the beginning of the 4th session:

Excerpt 1

Researcher: Alright... you two, Fred and...

Fred: Ok, we have...

Evan: I'll talk about mechanics, and he'll talk about the story!

F: Yeah...

R: Alright, this is good, you'll talk about the story, and he'll talk about the mechanics... right! Go on!

This type of specialisation, in which one person or one team deals with a specific part of a game (e.g. 3D modeller, scriptwriter, physics programmer), is common in major game development studios, and can be understood as a means to show off their knowledge regarding the work dynamics in AAA professional game development. Hence, by deciding to define specific roles, they were emulating this environment and subscribing to this “professional” discourse, as if, during the sessions, they were professionals involved in AAA contexts. The subscription to this

identity also relates, in some sense, to the *gamer* identity: the “gamer” – as understood in this paper – does not only know about games and their references in the pop-culture, but also about developers and the development process (Shaw, 2013).

What is interesting, however, is that this separation was not clear-cut: especially during the observations, even if they had divided tasks at the beginning (and both participants’ practical work on MissionMaker was referred to their “specialty”), practically all their major decisions (either regarding the story or game mechanics) were taken together. In this sense, their story/mechanics division can be understood as a way to organise their practical tasks, but also as a kind of Goffmanian (1959, p. 13) performance, in which individuals tend to manipulate how other people make sense of them by representing an identity as if it were a specific role in a plan – an expression of Goffman's model of the dramaturgical self. In their case, this work division can be understood as a similar kind of “dramaturgical” identity performance, a means to reinforce their gaming identity, especially because it allowed them to expose their knowledge about game development practices.

Nevertheless, it was not only through speech that they performed identities. The way their game was organised, in terms of objectives and possibilities, also illustrates which identities they were subscribing to. In order to explore this subject, I will focus my analysis on the third and final version of their game. This last version was more complex in terms of plot and game mechanics when compared to the previous ones, and presented some specific features that highlight how design aspects can be used to reinforce a specific identity.

In their game, the player controls Beowulf, who is amid a conflict between the King of Heorot and a Dragon and has to choose a side:

Excerpt 2

F: ... The story is basically where, you have to, talk to the King... and... it's either you choose to join the King or the Queen... and then it's a thing where, you... [hesitates] ... also, when you meet the Dragon, ...

E: That's not it; it's the Dragon or the King...

F: Oh, yeah, the Dragon or the King! When you meet...
[continues describing the game]

Basically, the player can choose to accept the King's or the Dragon's missions, which are mutually exclusive, since they mean killing all the characters from the other faction (e.g. the King's mission is to kill all warriors pledged to the Dragon and the Dragon itself).

Another relevant aspect found in Excerpt 2 is Fred's confusion between pledging an allegiance to the Queen or to the Dragon, justified by the Queen's position in the game as a dubious character that can change the experience: she is fearful about the future of her kingdom, and the

mission she gives to Beowulf is, like the King's, to slay the Dragon; however, the path indicated by her has many more enemies than the one indicated by the King. In order to justify this design choice, the students relied on a narrative element, as noticed in Excerpt 3 below:

Excerpt 3

E: It's kind of the beginning of the Beowulf poem where she kind of doesn't like Beowulf, because she wants her son to be king, and not Beowulf...

This decision of using a narrative element to reinforce a design choice is a good game design practice: as claimed by different game designers (e.g. Schell, 2008, p. 43), game mechanics and game narrative are two elements equally important for the game; by using one to justify the other, these students were (consciously or not) following this principle and creating a more cohesive production according to these conceptions.

Here, however, it is not only interesting to analyse their decision in terms of accepted game design practices, but also in terms of identity performance. This aspect becomes clearer when analysing the explanation given by Fred as to why they decided to have multiple paths – Dragon, King and Queen – in their game:

Excerpt 4

F: We both like games where you have secrets and you can, like, make decisions, and your decisions change the game... like what happens in *Fallout*: you can choose different things, and the ending that you get is different...

Based on Fred's comments, it is possible to claim that their decision of having different paths and endings was made based on their gaming repertoire: they sought to adapt and use the knowledge they acquired playing other games in their own product. Moreover, the direct reference to a successful game in terms of critics and audience – *Fallout* (Bethesda, 1997-2015) – also reinforces their gaming identity, since they use their gaming capital as a voucher for the cultural position they are claiming. *Fallout* was described as "one of their favourite" games on other occasions and, by doing so, Evan and Fred were, if we follow Kafai and Burke's (2015) ideas, positioning themselves as "insiders" in the traditional gamer culture. *Fallout* is seen as a "good" game within this culture, and by defining it as one of their favourites, they were, to some extent, demonstrating that they 'know how to pick games'.

Other elements found in their game can also be understood as reminiscences of expression of their *gamer* identity. An evident example is the difficulty of their game, expressed through different means: how hard it is to kill enemies, the actions that the player must take to traverse the game world and the existence of secret areas and trap rooms. These actions and traps will be further analysed here.

All actions in their game are dependent on clicks on other objects, and most of the relations are arbitrary: one example is found in Figure 1, which shows that, to open a door, the player has to click on a wall light.

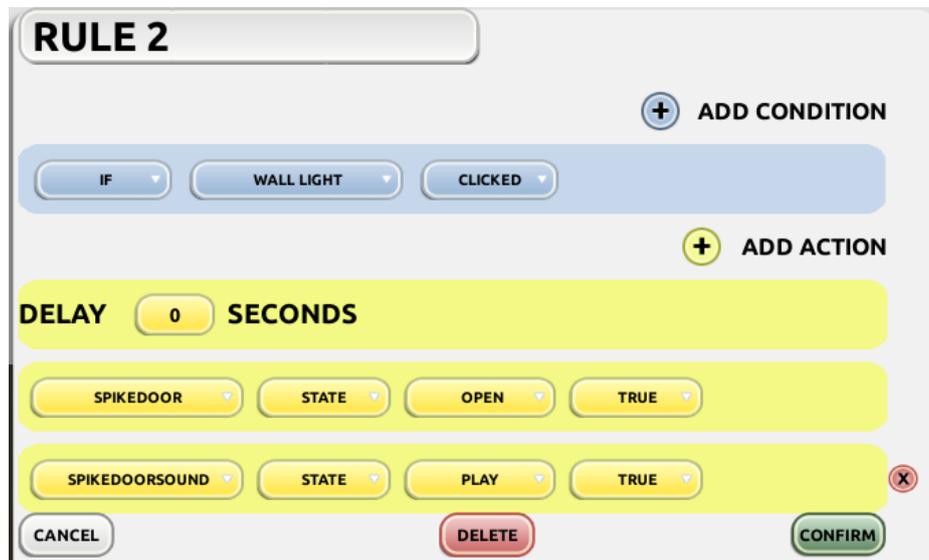


Figure 1: Example of rule showing how doors are opened

The difficulty here is specifically related to a non-existent indication that it is the wall light that opens the door. This pattern is constant throughout their game, which can make playing it very frustrating. However, this was clearly a deliberate decision: there is a function on MissionMaker called "highlight", which makes the desired object glow, emitting a bright yellow light to attract the player to it. Nevertheless, as seen in the excerpt below, this option was refuted by the participants:

Excerpt 5

- R: If you're doing secrets, by the way, you know that there's a highlight function, you can highlight objects, so, if you want to...
 E: Yeah, but not that obvious!
 R: That's too obvious, ok...

This rejection of the highlight function can be understood as evidence of their desire to produce a very difficult game, which is not at all obvious. Nevertheless, this game mechanic – having to click on arbitrary objects to progress in the game – gets even more complicated since they have set some trap rooms: spaces in which a click on the wrong object would in fact lock the player in the room with enemies, leading to a certain death. Figures 2 to 5 show an example of one of these traps working.



Figure 2: Example of trap room before player action

Notice the map on the table located inside the trap room in question (Figures 2, 5): if clicked, the door that leads to the only room exit will close after 3 seconds (Figure 3). The biggest problem occurs when Rule 12 (Figure 4) is executed: it spawns three enemies, which will seek and fight the player (Figure 5), who will probably die.

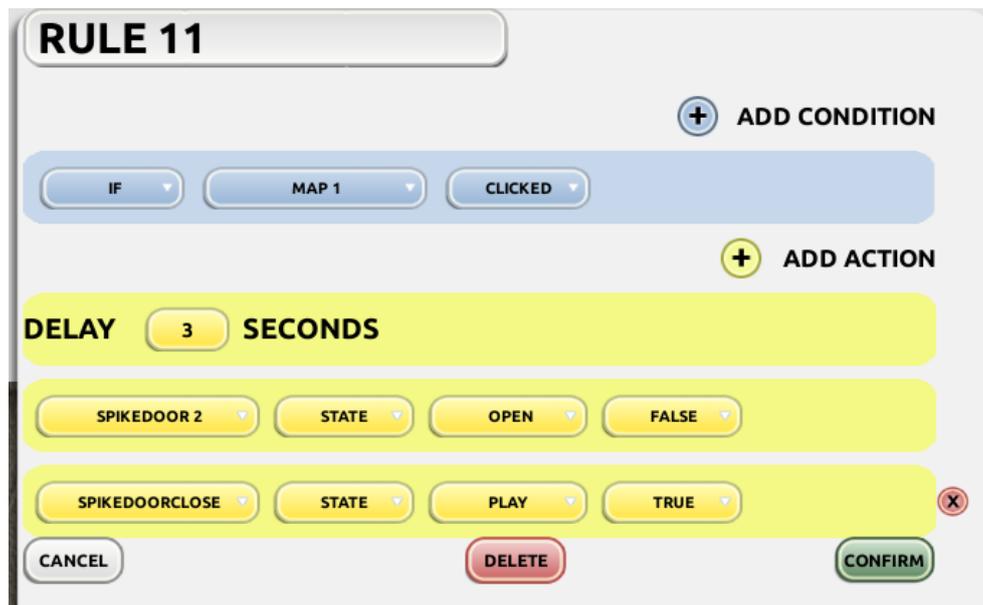


Figure 3: Rule that closes the door after the map is clicked

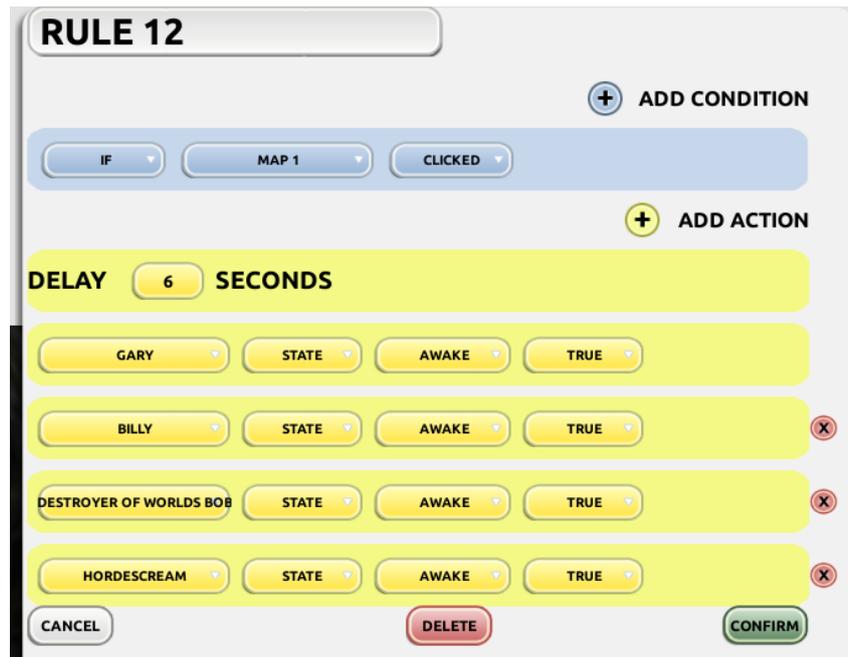


Figure 4: Rule that spawns enemies after the map is clicked



Figure 5: Enemies in formation to attack player in the trap room

This high level of difficulty can be analysed in two different ways. First, it can be understood in similar terms as the multiple paths and the reference to *Fallout*: as a way to reinforce their gamer identity by bringing their personal preferences (which are aligned to 'good gamer' preferences) into their game, and approximating their game to the corpus of 'good' games that they (as 'true gamers') like.

A second way of reading this difficulty is to understand it as an inability to create and present clues for players to comprehend and overcome the challenges. In this sense, their design decisions (e.g. the challenges or even the narrative justification for the Queen's path) were to some extent

coherent, but simultaneously hermetical, since the player did not have any information to consider. While it is important to remark that the high level of difficulty was a deliberate decision (as Excerpt 5 illustrates), their game sometimes is so closed and based in trial-and-error that it can lose the appeal among other players very quickly. Even the good practice of "sewing" mechanics and narrative together (as in the Queen example) gets somewhat lost in their game, as there is not much space for defining and developing – and, consequently for the player to understand – the narrative. Hence, fostering reflection on the idea of a target audience could raise awareness about this closeness and maybe lead to the creation of a less hermetical, but still personal production.

Another aspect related to a "gamer" identity, which might not be readily visible to the player, is the slight humour used throughout the game. One example is the ironic naming pattern adopted for some game elements, such as the enemies (Figure 4). Even if Beowulf is set in first-millennia Scandinavia, the names used do not match the poem's environment: rather than using Norse names, they opted for contemporary names common in English-speaking countries, such as Billy, Gary or Bob. The latter, specifically, is an interesting case since it was used several times, always combined with an (funny) epithet (such as "Destroyer of Worlds", as in the example above, "The Builder", or "The Return"). Another example would be the sound played when Beowulf dies: they opted for a classic sound effect - not part of MissionMaker's database - named *Wilhelm Scream*, used in many media products (films, TV series, videogames) often as an inside joke (Lee, 2007). Both cases can be seen as an internal joke, not only by exploring the tradition around using humour in games (Dormann & Biddle, 2009), but also by bringing again their gaming capital into their production.

Conclusion

This was a small-scale qualitative research, in which I aimed to look and understand a phenomenon (identities) through a specific approach (game-making) based on Cultural Studies. Due to its qualitative nature, it would be reckless to make generalising claims based on the results obtained here. Moreover, I must acknowledge that, in the case studied here, both students spoke as "insiders" in relation to the traditional gaming culture. Although it provided interesting insights on how a "gamer" identity can be expressed through game development, it can raise challenges whether game-making would be a valuable approach for "outsiders" – a question that needs to be further addressed. Even so, I believe that this project provides some relevant findings for future investigations and for Game Studies.

By analysing Evan and Fred's game, it is possible to notice how during the process of game-making they have performed mainly two different identities, *gamer* and *proto-professional*, as summarized by Figure 6.

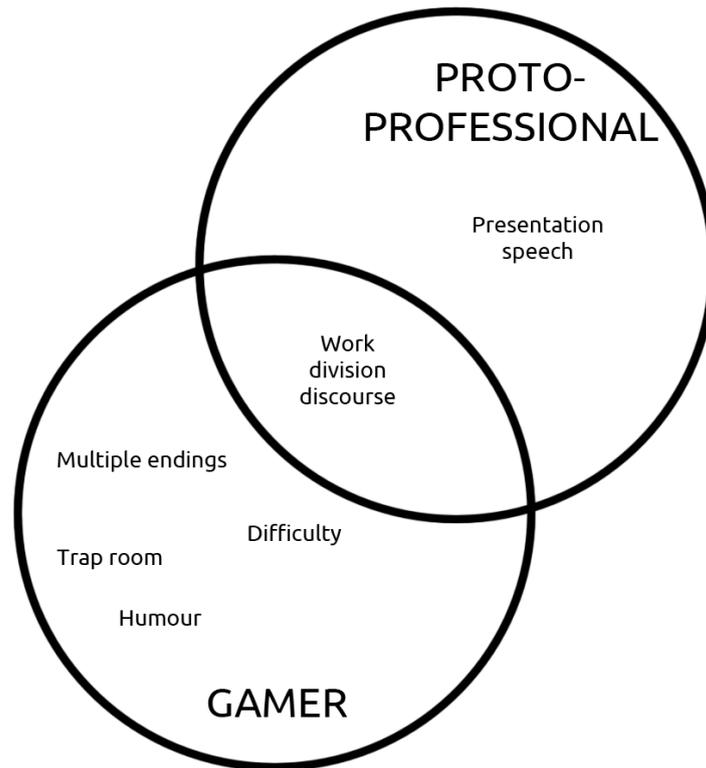


Figure 6: Identities performed by Evan and Fred during the project

These articulations indicate how identities are fluid and negotiable and also, to some extent, how game-making can be a means to foster the discussion about the constitution of “traditional gaming culture”, illustrated here by the participants’ design decisions. These, however, are not the only relevant aspects that can be taken from this research.

An important element that must be remarked upon is the value of peer-production (Denner & Werner, 2007): by having to externalise their ideas and to negotiate design decisions, participants have provided different opportunities for accessing and following how identities were claimed, negotiated and performed throughout the experience. Moreover, different research focused on young people and digital technologies that used this approach (e.g. Denner & Werner, 2007) have already reported positive outcomes of working in pairs rather than in one-by-one, indicating that this technique should be taken into account in further research on this topic.

Another important aspect regarding this project is the dissemination of the idea that games are an expressive form, and that they can be used by any people and for several ends. Here, I believe it became clear how the participants use their game as a space to express themselves by performing specific identities that can grant them a specific societal position.

Another concept that might need to be reinforced, especially in activities such as the one reported here, is that of "audience": as was clear in the analysed case, even if the students were able to use their game as a place to perform certain identities (as self-expression), their final product was, to some extent, hermetical. Obviously, the exercise of expressing yourself through a game is valid, but it would be even better if other people were able to engage meaningfully with this personal production. Therefore, while I do not believe that it is necessary to patronise participants by making games that are "easily digested" by everyone, I concede that it might be interesting to foster some kind of reflection on how players might engage with their production – what, in the end, can be understood as a small exercise of empathy.

At last, it is important to highlight the necessity of more research using different frameworks to cast a light on his topic: game-making and identities can be analysed under cultural lenses, as done in this paper, but other approaches, such as educational and psychological, should also be explored in order to advance these studies.

By highlighting this expressive aspect of games, I believe this type of project can help to break the *habitus* built around what games are and, more importantly, to democratise them as a form of media. In this scenario, I agree with Shaw (2010) when she argues that looking for the different usages of games in (broad) culture seems a more fruitful path than looking for culture in games.

This also applies to the conception of "gamer". Games have become pervasive, so it seems ludicrous that they are still treated as the property of "an oligarchy of videogame industrialist-gods" and their followers and these, together, judge what is a legitimate for a "gamer" and what is not (Bogost, 2011, p. 154). Ian Bogost (*ibid*) argues that "Soon gamers will be an anomaly. If we're very fortunate, they'll disappear altogether". I believe that gamers do not necessarily have to disappear; they should have their space, but they should not be treated as the sole owners of games, and the spread of game-making practices might help this process of democratisation.

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