

TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF DIGITAL GAMES: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF AN EMERGING FIELD

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Abstract

Digital games have become a key cultural phenomenon of the 21st century and have started influencing social dynamics worldwide. This study critically examines the emerging field of the sociology of digital games and takes digital games as a cultural economy, where cultural practices intersect with economic mechanisms. In this respect, digital games are situated as commodities that reflect and shape societal values, norms, and conflicts, extending beyond simple entertainment to construct identities, communicate cultural narratives, and foster social discourse. It is argued that the dominance of industry leaders in production and distribution perpetuates economic hierarchies, influencing accessibility, cultural engagement, and representation. The study purports that digital games often perpetuate capitalist ideals such as consumerism and meritocratic success, while also exploring their potential to subvert or challenge these ideologies. The study also analyzes the gender dynamics revolving around digital games and how virtual gaming communities influence social interaction. Studies on the intersection of digital games and social capital, cultural exchange, skill development, social norms and governance, identity and representation, addiction and well-being as well as blurring boundaries of physical and virtual worlds are seen as important study areas of this emerging subfield of sociology. The article concludes by calling for future research on the intersection of gaming with issues such as race, disability, and global inequality, attempting to outline key research areas in the field of the sociology of digital games. It is thought that the study will contribute to the literature by means of highlighting the most glaring social issues in the world of digital games.

Keywords: *Digital games, the sociology of digital games, virtual communities, social stratification, gender.*

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DİJİTAL OYUN SOSYOLOJİSİNE DOĞRU: GELİŞMEKTE OLAN BİR ALANIN ELEŞTİREL BİR İNCELEMESİ

Öz

Dijital oyunlar 21. yüzyılın önemli bir kültürel olgusu hâline gelmiş ve dünya çapında sosyal dinamikleri etkilemeye başlamıştır. Bu çalışma, gelişmekte olan dijital oyun sosyolojisi alanını eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla incelemekte ve dijital oyunları, kültürel pratiklerin ekonomik mekanizmalarla kesiştiği bir kültür ekonomisi alanı olarak ele almaktadır. Bu bağlamda dijital oyunlar, toplumsal değerleri, normları ve çatışmaları yansıtan ve şekillendiren, basit eğlencenin ötesine geçerek kimlikleri inşa eden, kültürel anlatıları ileten ve sosyal söylemi şekillendiren metalar olarak okunmaktadır. Çalışmada sektör liderlerinin üretim ve dağıtımdaki hâkimiyetinin ekonomik hiyerarşileri sürdürdüğü, erişilebilirliği, kültürel katılımı ve temsili etkilediği savunulmaktadır. Çalışmada dijital oyunların genellikle tüketimcilik ve meritokratik başarı gibi kapitalist idealleri sürdürdüğü öne sürülürken aynı zamanda oyunların bu ideolojileri yıkmaya veya bunlara meydan okuma potansiyeli taşıdığı da belirtilmektedir. Çalışma ayrıca dijital oyunlar etrafında dönen toplumsal cinsiyet dinamiklerini ve sanal oyun topluluklarının sosyal etkileşimi nasıl etkilediğini analiz etmektedir. Dijital oyunlar ile sosyal sermaye, kültürel alışveriş, beceri geliştirme, sosyal normlar ve yönetim, kimlik ve temsil, bağımlılık ve iyi oluşun yanı sıra fiziksel ve sanal dünyaların bulanıklaşan sınırlarının kesişimi üzerine yapılacak çalışmalar gelişmekte olan bu sosyoloji alt dalının önemli çalışma alanları olarak görülmektedir. Makale, oyunların ırk, engellilik ve küresel eşitsizlik gibi konularla kesişimi üzerine gelecekte yapılacak araştırmalar için çağrıda bulunarak ve dijital oyun sosyolojisi alanındaki temel araştırma alanlarının ana hatlarını çizmeye çalışarak sonlanmaktadır. Çalışmanın, dijital oyun dünyasında öne çıkan sosyal meseleleri vurgulayarak literatüre katkı sağlayacağı düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Dijital oyunlar, dijital oyun sosyolojisi, sanal topluluklar, sosyal tabakalaşma, toplumsal cinsiyet*

Introduction: The Sociology of a Twenty-first-century Medium

Besides being tools of simple pleasure, digital games¹ are becoming essential components of modern culture and society. In the twenty-first century, the gaming business has expanded to become a multibillion-dollar industry. A major portion of the industry's revenue comes from mobile platforms, which are primarily responsible for the entry of new companies globally and for this growth (Accenture, 2021). Digital games, ranging from casual mobile applications to complex multiplayer online games, represent a diverse cultural phenomenon enjoyed by people from all walks of life (Entertainment Software Association, 2021; Sığın, 2023, pp. 173-174). Not surprisingly, sociologists have increasingly turned their attention to digital games to understand the interplay between technology, identity, socialization, and power structures within these virtual spaces. This interest stems from the unique ways these virtual environments reflect and shape societal dynamics, offering insights into how individuals navigate identity construction and interact with broader social norms. Research is increasingly focusing on how digital games serve as spaces where cultural meanings are negotiated, power relations are enacted, and social identities are continuously formed and reformed within the context of a digitalizing society (Muriel, 2020, p. 2). However, the sociology of digital games remains an emerging field, requiring further theoretical development and empirical research to become fully established. This should not be taken to mean that communication studies and researchers have not studied this medium. In fact, a body of literature focusing on digital games has been steadily growing since the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly regarding the relationship between digital games and violent behavior, especially among young people. However, it is only in recent years that we can speak of a “sociology of digital games” as digital games

¹The terms “computer games” and “video games” are also commonly used in the literature. The current author has also employed the term “video games” in earlier research. However, for this study and future research, “digital games” is considered more appropriate, as it reflects the digital age and emphasizes the contrast between the physical and digital worlds.

have become a significant factor in national economies and as an increasing number of people have begun to engage with the medium.

This article aims to examine digital games through a sociological lens, focusing on three core areas: (1) how digital games reinforce or disrupt social hierarchies, (2) the role of digital games as spaces for identity formation and social interaction, and (3) the political and cultural relevance of gaming communities. These themes are explored under the subheadings: the cultural economy of digital games, digital games and social stratification, gender dynamics and digital games, and finally, virtual gaming communities and social interaction. By placing digital games within broader sociological discussions of culture and society, this study seeks to enhance our understanding of how digital spaces shape real-world social dynamics. A critical approach is employed to offer deeper insight into this evolving field, shedding light on the key areas of focus within the sociology of digital games.

1. The Cultural Economy of Digital Games

The cultural economy of digital games lies at the intersection of cultural practices and economic processes within the digital gaming industry. The concept relates to the multifaceted ways that digital games function as more than mere products of economic transactions. Digital games are deeply embedded in the cultural contexts that are both influencing and in turn are influenced by societal values, norms, and practices. Digital games are culturally produced commodities that could reproduce the dominant ideas, desires, and conflicts of the cultures in which they are produced. This medium helps not only provide entertainment but also construct identities, communicate cultural narratives, and hold together participants in social discourse.

Furthermore, both the production and consumption processes of digital games could be said to be rooted in the capitalist logic as profit and market expansion frequently serve as the driving forces behind their development. The “physical” means of production of the Industrial Revolution have given way to a more “digital” means of production in the digital age. Digital games are thus a big part of capitalist production systems. In fact, Karl Marx himself would probably consider revising his theory and perhaps refer to the digital game sector as a perpetrator of capitalist means of production if he lived in the twenty-first-century society. While independent game developers are now able to fund their projects through crowdfunding digital game projects, this is still a rather uncommon practice when considering the great bulk of games that are produced by big gaming companies. The market is dominated by industry giants such as Sony, Microsoft, and Electronic Arts, which develop and release games under their own strict guidelines. These companies create the economic structure that controls how players can access, buy, and promote digital games; they also frequently put profit margins and market share ahead of player experience and cultural relevance.

Moreover, this kind of economic paradigm has ramifications going beyond business dealings. Player behavior and cultural involvement are shaped by the manufacturing, distribution, and consumption processes that occur in the gaming business. As a result, stakeholders of digital games, whether they are those who identify themselves as “gamers”² or simply those who enjoy playing games every now and then, engage in cultural negotiation while navigating problems with identity, representation, and social interaction. The interaction between cultural practices and economic forces highlights the need to learn more about the cultural economics of digital games since it has a big impact on how games are developed and how players interact with these virtual worlds.

The backdrop of media globalization probably provides the best understanding of the relationship between the cultural production of digital games and social inequality, particularly concerning the power concentrated in a small number of huge multinational businesses. The gaming industry's economic and cultural components are shaped by companies such as Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo, which, as stated above, hold a dominant position in game production and distribution. As smaller businesses find it difficult to compete with the resources and market reach of these giants, the concentration of power leads to the emergence of oligopolies. Similar to what has occurred in other media sectors, media consolidation exacerbates diversity and economic inequality by means of limiting the range of

²The terms “gamer” and “player” are usually used interchangeably. However, if we were to make a difference between the two, it would probably lean on the time devoted to the act of gaming/playing (a) game(s). By this logic, a player is a person playing a game. A gamer, on the other hand, is a person who plays games. The term gamer has become more of an institutionalized identity.

viewpoints and cultural products that are accessible to the public (Yeganeh, 2020, p. 195). The stories in digital games are no longer “black and white” and “innocent”, with a hero-antagonist conflict at the center of the entire tale. They have progressed from simplistic stories like Mario rescuing Princess Peach from Bowser or Megaman defeating Dr. Wily to more complex themes, such as soldiers grappling with the drama and trauma of World War II in Call of Duty, or the Mexican Diaz brothers in Life is Strange 2 finding themselves at the center of Trump-era politics (Sığın, 2022, p. 9). This complexity in narratives in digital games raises questions such as “Who is telling the story?” and “What cultural, social, or political connotations does the story have?”

From a Marxist perspective, digital games can be seen as commodities that contribute to the reproduction of capitalist ideology.³ Specifically, games often promote competitive individualism, consumerism, and the valorization of neoliberal values, including the focus on personal success and meritocratic achievements. More recently, the implementation of Trophies in PlayStation systems and Achievements in Xbox and Steam have further driven more people to collect these commodities by “getting good” or even paying for them in some cases. The microtransaction systems in many games, where gamers are encouraged to purchase virtual goods, further highlight the commodification of digital experiences. Optional purchasable game content can range from cosmetics, such as alternative costumes or skins, to assets that provide significant advantages over enemies or other players. Tamir’s (2020, p. 64) study revealed that psychological boost, self-confidence, and feeling better appear to be dominant themes that are effective for the consumption of in-game items, specifically skins. In a way, although skins or cosmetics lack practical utility, they still bring joy to the buyer, much like a gold bracelet does for a woman in real life (Adorno, 2001).

However, players are not passive consumers. Many subcultures and fan communities appropriate digital games in creative ways, using them as sites of resistance or social critique, challenging dominant ideologies through modding, hacking, and collaborative play. One specific example could be modders making “nude mods” for games that are trying to be “politically correct” in their representation. For example, in Street Fighter 6, the producer Capcom decided to give Cammy pants, a departure from her traditional outfit, which featured no pants. The “No Leggings Mod” restores her look to resemble the outfit she wore in her debut in 1993. The mod aims to emphasize Cammy’s sex appeal, contrasting with Capcom’s more politically-correct approach.

Recently, the social-progressive narratives involving political correctness in digital games have been discussed thoroughly on various gaming platforms. These sets of actions taken by gaming companies are more commonly referred to as the “woke culture” in the gaming community. This concept refers to societal awareness and sensitivity toward social injustices, inequalities, and systemic discrimination. The term “woke” originally emerged from African American Vernacular English and implied being “awake” or alert to social issues, particularly those related to race and inequality. Over time, its usage has broadened to encompass a range of social justice concerns, including gender, sexuality, and environmental issues (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). While the push for greater diversity and representation aims to address long-standing biases and bring marginalized voices into the spotlight, it often faces criticism for prioritizing social agendas over gameplay and storytelling quality. Critics argue that the focus on inclusivity can lead to forced narratives and tokenism, where characters and stories are included not for their narrative value but to meet diversity quotas. This can sometimes result in superficial portrayals that fail to engage with complex issues in a meaningful way. Moreover, some players feel that these changes impose a particular ideological perspective, detracting from the immersive and escapist nature of gaming (Cote, 2018, p. 233).

As it stands, digital games are often used to convey specific ideologies and cultural portrayals. Let us turn to the economic value of digital game companies for an analysis. Table 1 shows the market value of the top eight gaming companies in 2022, whereas Table 2 shows the market value of the top eight gaming companies in 2024. According to Tassi (2022), the most valuable digital game companies as of 2022 are as follows:

³A comprehensive discussion of this issue from the Frankfurt School’s conceptualization of the culture industry can be found in Sığın, 2022.

Table 1. Top Eight Businesses in the Gaming Industry in 2022

Number	Company	Value	Country of Origin
1	Tencent	\$562.1 billion	China
2	Sony	\$156.6 billion	Japan
3	NetEase	\$69.42 billion	China
4	Nintendo	\$54.89 billion	Japan
5	Roblox	\$44 billion	United States
6	Epic Games	\$42 billion (est. valuation)	United States
7	Electronic Arts	\$38.7 billion	United States
8	Take-Two Interactive	\$18.8 billion	United States

While it would be a mistake to call the US a monopoly in the gaming industry, it is fair to say that there is a US hegemony in the sector, with four of the top eight businesses being based in the US. Major gaming companies such as Roblox Corporation, Epic Games, Electronic Arts, and Take-Two Interactive play significant roles in shaping cultural portrayals. To briefly look at some of the flagship games of these companies, Roblox offers a platform for user-generated content, resulting in diverse cultural representations, though inconsistent moderation can allow problematic content to persist. Epic Games uses Fortnite to incorporate various popular culture elements and diverse characters, which are often driven by commercial interests rather than deep cultural engagement. Electronic Arts, with franchises like The Sims and FIFA, seems to aim for inclusivity but can sometimes prioritize market demands over genuine cultural sensitivity. Take-Two Interactive, known for the Grand Theft Auto (GTA) series, explores complex social issues such as racism, gang wars, and drug abuse through satire, which can perpetuate stereotypes while critiquing societal norms. These companies influence cultural narratives in gaming, balancing broad market appeal with the risk of superficial or problematic portrayals. Given the widespread popularity of digital games and the fact that younger audiences, who are generally more impressionable, are the primary target for this medium, it is crucial to evaluate the potential of digital games as a tool of soft power (McKay, 2024). Their ability to shape perceptions, project cultural values, and influence global audiences makes digital games an important area of study for sociocultural and political impact.

Table 2. Top Ten Businesses in the Gaming Industry in 2024

Number	Company	Value	Country of Origin
1	Microsoft	\$2.826 trillion	United States
2	Tencent	\$624.81 billion	China
3	Sony	\$141.12 billion	Japan
4	Nintendo	\$79.79 billion	Japan
5	Sea (Garena)	\$73.12 billion	Singapore
6	NetEase	\$67.08 billion	China
7	Electronic Arts	\$36.59 billion	United States
8	Roblox	\$35.88 billion	United States

Source: Companies Market Cap, 2024.

Table 2 indicates a decline in U.S. dominance in the sector by 2024, compared to 2022, as Asian companies continue to gain prominence. This not only shows the dynamic and rapidly-changing nature of the sector but also that the cultural landscape of digital games is rather “shaky” in that different cultural representations are likely to be present as more non-US shareholders take hold in the market. The influence of Asian companies in the market is already evident through globally popular games like Genshin Impact. While it is too early to declare the end of US hegemony in gaming, there appears to be a growing trend in that direction.

2. Digital Games and Social Stratification

The gap between those with access to digital technologies and those who lack it, often referred to as “the digital divide”, plays a significant role in shaping who will be able to participate in gaming cultures and who will not (Bainbridge, 2016). Socioeconomic status, education, and geographical location affect access to gaming platforms and high-speed Internet, leading to unequal participation across different social groups. This unequal access reinforces existing social hierarchies, as marginalized groups often find themselves excluded from the mainstream gaming culture. Solove (2007, pp. 94-95) discusses that an inactive Internet user leaves a void that can be filled by others, who may construct or shape their identity in their place. This highlights the importance of active participation in managing one's digital footprint. Let us consider the example of an academic whose grading criteria are perceived as “difficult” by their students. If this academic does not actively use the Internet or take control of constructing their online identity, the students may end up shaping it for them. The academic may turn out to be a “horrible”, “ruthless”, and “malicious” person for those reading about them online simply because students find their courses difficult to pass.

The same also applies to gaming, although in a more collective manner. In digital games, the portrayal of identities is heavily influenced by the production team's decisions, which can lead to various representation issues. These issues might include underrepresentation, where certain social classes, ethnicities, gender identities, or other social categories are inadequately represented or entirely absent. Misrepresentation becomes an issue when these identities are depicted in ways that are inaccurate or stereotypical, perpetuating harmful biases (Bakan and Bakan, 2019, pp. 103-106). Additionally, directive representation can be a cause for concern when the portrayal is intentionally skewed to convey a particular agenda or perspective, leading to not accurately reflecting the diversity and complexity of real-world identities. Such issues related to representation in digital games are deemed critical to be addressed from a sociological point of view because they shape players' perceptions and contribute to broader societal narratives about different groups (Deskins, 2013, p. 33). As an example, in the ever-popular GTA series, black and Mexican characters are frequently portrayed as being involved in gangs and committing violent crimes, bringing to mind the question “Why are black and Mexican characters depicted as being part of crimes more than white characters?”

Shaped mostly after American society, the GTA series mirrors its cultural, social, and economic dynamics. The game effectively illustrates themes like gang violence and criminality in American urban settings while neglecting the wider array of social experiences found in other cultures. In contrast to digital games from other cultures—such as Japanese games that explore themes of honor and familial obligation, or European games that tackle social issues like class disparity and political turmoil—GTA predominantly emphasizes American stereotypes and urban crime. This limited perspective can reinforce prevailing preconceptions regarding American society and neglect to provide a more comprehensive understanding of other global stances. Consequently, the game narrows players' comprehension of the richness and diversity of experiences available in other cultures and perpetuates some societal prejudices. Although more and more popular digital games are examining other cultures (for example, the God of War series, which features myths from Greece and the Nordic countries, and the Assassin's Creed series, which features historical settings and cultural explorations), representation issues are still common in them.

In-game spaces frequently function as miniature representations of actual social hierarchy, reflecting and oftentimes intensifying pre-existing societal disparities. MMOs like World of Warcraft and more contemporary battle royale games like Fortnite have produced intricate virtual economies where users can engage in virtual labor and amass virtual riches, mimicking the “reward and punishment” structures of capitalism (Castronova et al., 2009, p.

701). The activities known as “gold farming” or “grinding” in which players aggressively try to amass in-game currency—often more than is necessary—in games such as World of Warcraft, demonstrates how significant these virtual economies can be and how they affect real-world economies. Occasionally, real money can be obtained by converting the in-game currencies (see Dibbell, 2007).

Social hierarchies in digital games, such as competitive ladders and ranking systems, tend to reflect class divisions in the real world. For example, players are arranged into a distinct hierarchy according to their performance using the “Elo” rating system, which was first created for chess but is now extensively utilized in online gaming (Véron et al., 2014). Although this system is purportedly meritocratic, it has the potential to perpetuate existing disparities because players with greater leisure time or money can devote more of it to honing their abilities or gaining advantages in-game.

The “pay-to-win” model is another matter that needs to be discussed. In this model, users can spend real money to obtain in-game advantages, which adds to the problem of inequality in gaming environments. The digital divide is again created as a result of capitalist working mechanisms in digital games. The pay-to-win model is becoming more and more common, especially in mobile gaming, and it raises important concerns about how gaming environments could be representing or even escalating larger social injustices (Hamari et al., 2017, 543-544). Empirical data supports this claim. For instance, King et al. (2019, pp. 139-141) discovered that individuals who spend money on free-to-play games frequently feel guilty and under financial hardship, which raises the possibility that these titles are taking advantage of weaker demographics. The term “playbor” (a portmanteau from “play” and “labor”) is increasingly being used (see Zaucha and Agur, 2023) to show how the line between play and work is getting blurred through user-generated content creation, grinding for in-game resources, etc. Are people playing games to entertain themselves or working to earn more in-game rewards? This is another critical point that should be scrutinized.

However, it should be noted that digital games can also offer areas for resistance against these disparities. According to De Smale et al. (2017, p. 393), certain digital games, such as Papers, Please and This War of Mine, encourage players to reconsider social and political structures that are openly critiqued. Furthermore, online gaming communities can occasionally act as places where marginalized people can go to find support and community (Nakamura, 2017, p. 249).

All in all, while real-world systems of inequality are often replicated in digital games, these systems may also be contested and undermined. This renders digital games a complex and important arena for understanding and potentially addressing broader social inequities. It is, therefore, important to analyze digital games through a sociological lens. More empirical study is required, again, to understand the mechanisms at play when digital games and social inequality collide.

3. Gender Dynamics and Digital Games

Historically, digital games were marketed toward young males, which reinforced the idea that gaming was a male-dominated hobby (Kline et al., 2003, pp. 12-13). Female gamers often face harassment and discrimination in gaming environments, which has sparked debates about the gendered nature of online spaces (Fox and Tang, 2014, p. 314). While the number of female gamers, who broadcast themselves on platforms like Twitch and YouTube, is increasing, there is debate regarding the types of games these female gamers choose to play, often revolving around how they choose to play more casual games as opposed to ones that “require skill” (see Sığın, 2022). Lindner (2024) makes a questionable claim that gender stereotypes in eSports are being shattered in favor of women, yet only 37% of active players in eSports competitions are women, and they represent just 24% of the competitive eSports audience globally (Entertainment Software Association, 2021). It follows that, in a distinction between professional versus casual games, female gamers lag significantly behind their male counterparts in the professional gaming domain. Beyond being underrepresented, this also raises the issue of women often engaging in “unworthy” casual games, typically viewed as merely a way to pass the time. This results in yet another gender-based distinction: Men play more professional games, whereas women play more casual games. Overall, men tend to receive a larger share of the benefits or opportunities in gaming compared to women.

The representation of gender in digital games has also been critiqued for perpetuating harmful stereotypes. Female characters are frequently hypersexualized or relegated to secondary roles, while male characters embody exaggerated forms of masculinity (Downs and Smith, 2010, p. 727; Behm-Morawitz and Mastro, 2009, p. 809). For example, many of the female champions in League of Legends are designed with exaggerated, sexualized features. Characters like Jinx and Ahri in this series are depicted with revealing outfits and exaggerated proportions that emphasize their sexual appeal. This design choice contrasts with male champions, who typically have more varied and less sexualized designs. Similarly, the Dead or Alive series is known for its oversexualized outfit designs and the inclusion of “bounce physics”, which causes the female characters' breasts to jiggle in response to their movements. This feature has been criticized for objectifying female characters and prioritizing sexual appeal over character development and realistic design. Nevertheless, feminist interventions in game design and criticism have pushed for more inclusive and diverse representations of gender (Shaw, 2014). For example, game series such as The Sims and Life is Strange have been praised for their nuanced portrayals of gender and sexuality, offering alternative narratives to the traditional male-dominated gaming experience (Consalvo, 2004, p. 180; Consalvo, 2012, p. 2; Butt and Dunne, 2019, p. 2).

The rise of independent game development and increased awareness of gender issues in gaming have contributed to more diverse and inclusive game content and communities (Harvey and Fisher, 2015, p. 3). The increasing appearance of LGBTIQ+ characters in digital games, often linked to the influence of the “woke” culture discussed above, continues to generate ongoing discussion. However, discussions about the portrayal of violence against women (or in this case, against female characters) in digital games, which was a big subject in the late 1980s and early 1990s, seem to have been a thing of the past. In the initial version of Final Fight, for example, the enemy character Poison was intended to be a cisgender woman. However, the character was changed to a transgender woman after concerns were raised that depicting violence against women might be seen as inappropriate in the US, potentially sparking controversy. The character has been depicted and described as a transgender woman in all media she has appeared in since. Today, female characters are subjected to many forms of violence without that seemingly not being an issue for most big companies.

Additionally, according to Kafai et al. (2008, p. xi), the potential of digital games as a platform for questioning gender norms and advancing gender equality seems to be receiving increasing attention. To address the gender imbalance in the business from the bottom up, for instance, educational initiatives and game design programs have evolved, intending to encourage girls and women to participate in game production (CCY, n.d.). Accordingly, the lead figure behind the production team of the successful Uncharted games was a woman named Amy Hennig. Furthermore, as stated before, modders come up with mods to challenge “restrictive” or “traditional” gender norms as well. These mods can be nude modes that stand in the face of concealing political moves.

To sum up, fostering a more equitable gaming culture requires ongoing discussions about gender representation, inclusivity, and the experiences of various players as the gaming landscape develops and changes (Taylor et al., 2009, pp. 248-249).

4. Virtual Gaming Communities and Social Interaction

Digital games, MMOGs in particular, have developed into intricate social ecosystems. Virtual world games such as Guild Wars 2, Path of Exile, and Final Fantasy XIV provide players with the chance to socialize, establish alliances, and engage with others. Players form friendships, romantic relationships, and even business dealings within these virtual communities, which frequently behave as extensions of real-world social contacts (Nardi and Harris, 2006, pp. 405-409).

Gamers can design avatars that resemble or differ from their actual identities in terms of social status, gender, and race. This phenomenon, dubbed “identity tourism”, enables people to experience and assume various social roles in the secure environment of a virtual environment (Nakamura, 2002, p. 13). Players can experiment with different identities and social behaviors in these games that could be restricted in real life. As such, traditional sociological understandings of fixed social categories are challenged by the flexibility of identity in digital games (Turkle, 1995, p. 9). This further begs for research on these virtual spaces in order to understand the changing nature of (digital) identity.

Furthermore, literature shows that virtual gaming communities could have significant impacts on players' social lives and well-being:

Social Capital: Involvement in online gaming communities can result in the development of social capital in the virtual world as well as the real one (Sachan et al., 2025). Through their shared gaming experiences, players frequently create enduring support systems and friendships (Williams et al., 2006, p. 357). Within the field of the sociology of digital games, the dynamics of these social networks have the potential to become significant research fields.

Cultural Exchange: Online games have the potential to foster cross-cultural understanding and interaction by drawing players from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. As a result of this worldwide connectivity, players may be exposed to various viewpoints and lifestyles (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006, pp. 901-902). In the digital age, intercultural communication through digital games may become a significant study area.

Skill Development: Participating in online gaming communities can help people develop a variety of abilities, such as problem-solving, leadership, and cooperation. In MMOGs, guilds and raid groups need to coordinate and have a strategy, which may be used in real life (Ducheneaut and Moore, 2005, pp. 91-93). To determine how effective virtual gaming communities are at helping people enhance their talents, more research is needed.

Economic Systems: A growing number of games have complex in-game marketplaces where users may exchange virtual products and services. Economists have examined these virtual economies to comprehend emergent market behaviors since they frequently reflect real-world economic principles (Castronova, 2005, p. 2). More research is required to comprehend the economic processes of the gaming industry, much like the rising body of knowledge on the Bitcoin market. The concept of “playbor” could be employed to carry out deeper analyses of the convergence of ludology and digital labor theory. People employed in the digital gaming sector and their precarity is yet another subject that requires more research to be conducted.

Social Norms and Governance: Virtual gaming communities create their own laws, regulations, and systems of government. In the absence of conventional authority structures, these emergent social systems offer insights into how communities self-organize and govern behavior (Taylor, 2006, p. 161). Digital game discussions frequently lead to discussions on larger political power systems, which occasionally results in the censoring of websites or platforms such as Twitch, Discord, and even specific games. What are the social norms and rules of virtual gaming communities? How do they resemble or differ from those of the real world? These questions are yet to be answered fully by social scientists.

Identity and Representation: Players in digital games can explore various facets of their identities by creating their own avatars. This has sparked conversations on diversity and representation in gaming, as well as how games could either challenge or legitimize existing societal stereotypes (Shaw, 2014, pp. 15-22). Do players typically construct identities or avatars that reflect who they are in real life, or do they make other choices and use the in-game creation processes as a means of escaping reality?

Addiction and Well-being: Although gaming communities offer favorable social experiences, scholars have also investigated the possible adverse consequences, including gaming addiction and its influence on mental well-being and interpersonal interactions in the real world (Kuss and Griffiths, 2012). In fact, the majority of early research on digital games is on their negative impacts. When it comes to the consequences of gaming, this is one of the more established research areas. More research, meanwhile, would be helpful in understanding the fluctuating consequences of gaming addiction and well-being, given the dynamic nature of games.

Blurring Boundaries of Physical and Virtual Worlds: The study of virtual gaming communities continues to grow as games become more sophisticated and integrated into our daily lives. As virtual and augmented reality technologies advance, the boundaries between physical and virtual social spaces may become blurred more and more, presenting new challenges and opportunities for social interaction and community building (Boellstorff, 2015). Discussions on the blurring boundaries of real and virtual worlds could be linked to broader Metaverse discussions.

Conclusion

The academic field of the sociology of digital games has emerged as an essential area of inquiry, signifying the increasing importance of gaming within modern societal contexts. This study attempted to critically explore three fundamental domains that elucidate the intricate interactions between digital games and social dynamics: (1) The function of digital games in either reinforcing or challenging established social hierarchies, (2) digital games as environments conducive to identity construction and social engagement, and (3) the political and cultural significance of gaming communities.

The investigation into the realm of digital games indicates that they are way more than products of entertainment; rather, they are influential cultural artifacts that both reproduce and transform societal norms, values, and power dynamics. The cultural economy surrounding digital games shows their working mechanisms within capitalist frameworks, frequently perpetuating existing inequalities while simultaneously providing potential tools for resistance and critique. The inquiry into social stratification in gaming contexts reveals that digital divides and in-game economic systems can reflect and, at times, aggravate real-world disparities. Nevertheless, digital games also offer opportunities for players to contest these hierarchies and explore alternative social configurations. The dynamics of gender within digital games remain a pivotal area of investigation, as enduring challenges related to representation and harassment coexist with initiatives aimed at fostering greater inclusivity and diversity. The evolving narrative of gender in gaming encapsulates broader societal discussions for equity and acknowledgment. Lastly, the analysis of virtual gaming communities underscores the significant influence of digital games on social interaction, identity development, and community formation. These virtual environments function as experimental grounds for innovative forms of social organization, economic systems, and cultural interchange while simultaneously presenting challenges associated with addiction and overall well-being. The blending of the real world with the virtual world has also emerged as a significant research area.

If digital games are going to continue changing and incorporating new technologies (such as virtual reality and augmented reality), so too will their sociological relevance. Future investigation in the field could focus on how gaming intersects with different social problems, including race, disability, and global injustices. Additionally, the potential of games to be used as tools for social change and education is a line that needs further clarification. The literature on the sociology of digital games is still emerging, mainly from the Anglo-American world. It would be elucidating to see research from other parts of the world. The sociology of digital games provides critical insights into the relationships among technology, culture, and society in the digital age. By persistently engaging in a critical analysis of these virtual realms and their tangible impacts, we can increase our understanding of not only digital games as a medium but also of twenty-first-century society.

We live in the digital age, and digital games are here to stay. They should be studied more systematically in order to understand how they shape the twenty-first-century individual and society. The current study attempted to show some of the research areas for this medium for social scientists. However, different research areas are bound to come up as people's interaction patterns with digital games transform.

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Genişletilmiş Özet

Dijital oyunlar, 21. yüzyılın en dikkat çekici kültürel olgularından biri olarak dünya genelinde sosyal dinamikleri etkileyen önemli bir alan hâline gelmiştir. Bu çalışma, gelişmekte olan dijital oyun sosyolojisi alanını eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla inceleyerek dijital oyunların kültürel ve ekonomik mekanizmalarla nasıl kesiştiğini ele almaktadır. Çalışmada dijital oyunlar yalnızca eğlence aracı olarak değil, kimlik inşası, kültürel anlatıların aktarılması ve toplumsal söylemin şekillendirilmesi gibi çeşitli işlevlere sahip bir kültür ekonomisinin parçası olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Çalışma; dijital oyunların sosyal tabakalaşmayı nasıl şekillendirdiğini, toplumsal cinsiyet dinamikleri üzerindeki etkilerini ve sanal oyuncu topluluklarının sosyal etkileşimde oynadığı rolü de tartışmaktadır.

Dijital oyunların, kültürel pratiklerin ekonomik süreçlerle kesiştiği bir bağlamda incelenmesi gerektiği düşünülmektedir. Üretim ve tüketim süreçlerinin çoğunlukla kapitalist mantığa uygun bir şekilde ilerlediği oyun endüstrisi, büyük şirketlerin egemenliği altında şekillenmiştir. Sony, Microsoft ve Electronic Arts gibi büyük firmalar, dijital oyunların üretim ve dağıtım süreçlerini kontrol ederek ekonomik hiyerarşilerin devamını sağlamaktadır. Bu durum, erişilebilirlik, temsiliyet ve kültürel katılım gibi kritik konuları etkilerken oyuncuların oyunlara erişim biçimlerini de sınırlandırabilmektedir.

Dijital oyunlar kapitalist değerleri sürdürürken aynı zamanda bu değerlere karşı çıkılmasına veya bunların sorgulanmasına olanak sağlayan bir alan olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Örneğin, oyun içi satın alma işlemleri kapitalist üretim ve tüketim modellerini yansıtırken kullanıcılar tarafından oluşturulan içerikler, oyuncuların bu modellere yaratıcı tepkiler verebilmelerini ve bazen mevcut ekonomik paradigmaları sorgulayabilmelerine olanak sağlamaktadır. Bununla birlikte, oyunlarda yer alan hikayelerin kim tarafından, hangi amaçlarla anlatıldığı gibi sorular, oyunların yalnızca ticari ürünler değil, aynı zamanda ideolojik araçlar olduğunu da ortaya koymaktadır.

Toplumsal yaşamda gözlemlenen sosyal eşitsizlikler, dijital oyun dünyasında da kendini göstermektedir. Sosyoekonomik durum, eğitim düzeyi ve coğrafi konum, bireylerin oyunlara erişimini ve oyun kültürüne katılımını etkileyen faktörler arasında yer almaktadır. “Digital divide” (dijital uçurum) olarak adlandırılan bu durum, belirli grupların oyun dünyasından dışlanmasına yol açarken oyun kültüründeki sosyal hiyerarşileri de güçlendirmektedir.

Dijital oyunlar içinde yer alan ekonomik sistemler ve sosyal yapıların, gerçek dünyadaki eşitsizlikleri yansıttığı ve bazen bu eşitsizlikleri daha da derinleştirdiği görülmektedir. Örneğin, “pay-to-win” (kazanmak için öde) modeli, oyuncuların gerçek para karşılığında avantajlar satın almasına olanak tanıyarak oyun içindeki eşitlik duygusunu zedelemekte ve kapitalist mekanizmaların oyun dünyasına nasıl yansıdığını göstermektedir. Buna karşın, bazı oyunlar ve sanal topluluklar, bu eşitsizliklere meydan okuma ve alternatif sosyal yapıların keşfedilmesi için bir platform sağlayabilmektedir.

Dijital oyunlar, tarihsel olarak erkek egemen bir alan olarak görülmüştür. Bu durum, oyunların pazarlanma biçiminden karakter tasarımlarına kadar pek çok alanda kendini göstermiştir. Kadın oyuncular, oyun topluluklarında sıklıkla cinsiyetçi tutumlarla karşılaşmakta ve dijital oyunlar, toplumsal cinsiyet kalıp yargılarını yeniden üreten bir mecra olarak eleştirilmektedir.

Bununla birlikte, feminist yaklaşımlar ve bağımsız oyun geliştiricilerin katkılarıyla daha kapsayıcı ve çeşitli temsillerin ortaya çıktığı gözlemlenmiştir. The Sims ve Life is Strange gibi oyun serileri, toplumsal cinsiyet ve cinsellik konularında daha nüanslı anlatılar sunarak geleneksel erkek egemen oyun anlayışına alternatifler getirmiştir. Ayrıca, oyuncu topluluklarının LGBTQ+ karakterlere ve liberal sol bir zeminde gelişen “woke” (uyanık) kültürüne verdiği tepkiler, dijital oyun dünyasındaki toplumsal cinsiyet dinamiklerini daha geniş bir bağlama oturtmaktadır. Bu açıdan bakıldığında, dijital oyunlar toplumsal cinsiyet kalıp yargılarının devamlılığını sağlamakla birlikte bunlara meydan okumak için de gerekli zemini kullanıcılara sağlamaktadır.

Sanal oyuncu toplulukları, oyuncuların kimliklerini keşfetmesi, sosyal bağlantılar kurması ve yeni beceriler geliştirmesi için önemli bir alan sunar. Çok sayıda oyuncunun aynı anda bir arada bulunduğu MMORPG’ler gibi oyunlar, oyuncuların karmaşık sosyal ekosistemlerde etkileşime girmesine olanak tanırken bu topluluklar genellikle gerçek dünyadaki sosyal ilişkilerin bir uzantısı olarak işlev görür.

Dijital oyunlar aynı zamanda bireylerin kimliklerini yeniden şekillendirmesi ve toplumsal normlara meydan okuması için de bir alan sunmaktadır. Oyuncular, avaturları aracılığıyla farklı sosyal roller deneyimleyebilir ve bu, geleneksel sosyolojik anlayışları zorlayan yeni kimlik ve temsil biçimlerine yol açabilir. Bununla birlikte, oyuncu topluluklarının oyuncuların toplumsal yaşamları ve iyi oluşları üzerindeki etkileri de dikkate alınması gereken bir diğer önemli konudur. Bu bağlamda sosyal sermaye, kültürel değış tokuş, beceri geliştirme, ekonomik sistemler, sosyal normlar ve yönetim, kimlik ve temsil, bağımlılık ve iyi oluş, fiziksel ve sanal dünyaların bulanıklaşan sınırları gibi çalışma alanlarında daha fazla ampirik çalışmaya ihtiyaç duyulduğu not edilmiştir.

Bu çalışma, dijital oyunların sadece eğlence araçları olmadığını, aynı zamanda toplumsal normları, değerleri ve güç dinamiklerini yansıtan ve şekillendiren kültürel ürünler olduğunu vurgulamıştır. Dijital oyun sosyolojisi, söz konusu kültür ürünlerinin toplumsal etkilerini anlamak için önemli bir alan olarak öne çıkmaktadır.

Bu çalışmada, eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla, gelişmekte olan dijital oyun sosyolojisi alanında gelecekte yapılacak çalışmalarda dijital oyunların ırk, engellilik ve küresel eşitsizlik gibi sosyal sorunlarla kesişimi üzerine daha fazla odaklanılabileceği vurgulanmaktadır. Ayrıca, dijital oyunların sosyal değışim ve eğitim araçları olarak kullanımı gibi konuların daha ayrıntılı bir şekilde incelenmesi önemlidir. Dijital oyunlar, dijital çağın hem birey hem de toplum üzerindeki etkilerini anlamak için önemli bir araçtır. Bu nedenle, dijital oyun sosyolojisi alanında yapılacak araştırmalar, 21. yüzyıl toplumunu ve kültürünü anlamada oldukça önemli bir rol oynayacaktır.