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## Philosophical and Hermeneutic Analysis of Videogame Player Identity

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### *Video Oyunu Oyuncu Kimliğinin Felsefi ve Hermeneutik Analizi*

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**Abstract:** The article is devoted to philosophical and hermeneutic analysis of videogame player identity. The purpose of the study is to reveal the general features of the videogame player identity, to distinguish it from gamer identity and to define common levels of its formation, on the basis of which the further methodology of videogame philosophy may be formed without stereotypical views. To achieve it, the classification and systematization, as well as the analysis and synthesis, applied to the identity concept in general and studies on gamer self-identity in particular, have been used. Considering player identity in hermeneutic terms, the authors have delineated the main levels of the player identity formation, namely: videogame preferences, manner of playing and character / personal profile identity. All this levels not only form player identity as an individual way to identify oneself, but also act as a ground for further creation of gamer identity.

**Keywords:** Videogame, gamer, player, videogame hermeneutics, identity formation, videogame player identity.



## Introduction

These days, an identity formation and self-identification processes have received an increased attention of scientists working in different areas. Identity problems are studied in connection with politics, ethnicity, religion, even employment and self-development. In these areas, the identity formation processes in the present can be compared to the same processes in the past; however, informatization and virtualization have contributed to the establishment of new structures that are changing the usual way of life and perception of the world. The postmodern era and types of society formed today correspond to the emergence of new personal characteristics and reconsideration of self-identity, especially in a view of social pressure, stigmatization and such phenomena as identity shopping (Chriss, 2015). New forms of interaction like the cyberspace form new identities, and their peculiarities may differ from the characteristics of identities formed in the realities we are used to.

One of the new phenomena that changes an approach to understanding identity is the videogame phenomenon. The development of the videogame reality has contributed to the formation of several totally new identity types, blended identities which not only characterize a person inside the virtual worlds and online spaces, but also form the perception of the so-called “real world” and further changes in relationship with it. One of the central identities of the videogame culture is player identity. In many studies, “player” is perceived as a temporary role connected with the process of playing videogames, however, such an approach limits the understanding of the impact of videogames on the worldview and behavior. The concept of “gamer”, in turn, is usually in the focus of researchers, and there are many studies of it, which are devoted to some of its manifestations or features. Videogame scientists are interested in gender, age of gamers, their relationship and mutual influence. But it forms the particular image of the gamer which cannot be applied to players’ identity in all cases when videogames are an important part of one’s life. There is also different statistics on both players’ and gamers’ preferences, however, it has not received proper consideration in the area of players’ personal development and formation of their personality. All this leads to the narrow understanding of videogame subjects and strengthens stereotypi-



cal view on gamers as a specific subculture which does not include people for whom videogames are a part of life, but not a hobby, job, self-identity criterion etc. This, in turn, constrains the formation of general methodology of videogame philosophy and game studies as an area of (video) game research. Due to this fact, studies of the videogame player identity and systematization of its characteristics and ways of forming, generalization of common features and description of the unified structure is still relevant despite the numerous studies in this area.

Based on the above, the purpose of this study is to reveal the general features of the videogame player identity, to distinguish it from gamer identity and to define common levels of its formation, on the basis of which the further methodology of videogame philosophy may be formed without stereotypical views.

### **Methodology**

To achieve the stated purpose, it was important to examine the components of the videogame player identity and parts of videogame culture that have the greatest influence on them. Due to this fact, both work with previous studies on peculiarities of identification through videogames and practical considerations of the process of playing, reviews, streams, “let’s play” videos etc. have been conducted. The general theories on the identity formation have also been studied to distinguish the criteria of further analysis.

We would like to emphasize the importance of the use of practice in the area of videogame culture. For game studies and videogame research, only the combination of theoretical and practical approaches allows to stay unbiased. According to E. Aarseth (2007), three main ways to study videogames are the consideration of such “technical” parts of videogames as game rules, design and mechanics, study of reviews, reports and other materials made after the process of playing and the process of playing itself. Without the third way, the effectiveness of research is reduced, because the point of view “inside” the game worlds and the understanding of videogames from the inside of the videogame culture is lost. In case of studying self-identity, an outside perspective leaves many important details out of a researcher’s focus. Therefore, exploration of in-game communities, description of videogames related to the subject of study and



platforms through which the player identity can be studied is necessary for achieving our purpose.

The main scientific methods of our study used to delineate the videogame player identity peculiarities and structure have been the classification and systematization, as well as the analysis and synthesis, applied to the identity concept in general and studies on gamer self-identity in particular. Content analysis has been used to distinguish levels on which the videogame player identity is formed without biases and stereotypes inherent in many narrow-focused studies. The analysis of the opportunities given to players by such game sales platforms as Steam, Origin, Epic Games Store etc. has also been an important part to complement the ways of player self-representation.

### **The definition of identity and main points of its study**

The issues of self-identity and identification started to be actively considered by scientists in the middle of the 20th century, however, the first interest in self-perception and images may be seen even in Aristotle's works (Matsuda, 2015). The terms "identity", "identity formation" and "identity crisis" in the modern sense were introduced into scientific circulation by E. Erikson, who considered the formation of identity, ground on which it is formed, peculiarities of examination and evaluation of one's personality etc. Special attention was paid to adolescence as the time in which identity usually becomes the focus of concern, however, other stages of human development were also revealed in connection with identity changes and transformations (Sokol, 2009). Erikson's thoughts have been criticized by many scientists; nevertheless, his ideas laid the basis for further discussion of this topic in different areas of human life.

With changes in social structure and cultural patterns, the identity formation process has passed three main stages: from ascription of social identities and adoption of personality and ego identities to contemporary identity managing in different areas of society and not even construction, but discovery of specific features of one's "self" (Côté, 1996). Due to its complicated nature, today, identity is usually considered in both individual (personal) and social aspects. As for individual identity, it is about some distinctive features that are important for a person to distinguish oneself from others and, accordingly, about the formation of a particular



worldview, preferences and values; social identity is about belonging to some social groups or categories that are defined by certain features, characteristics and rules that determine person's place, membership etc. (Fearon, 1999). These aspects are interdependent, both of them emerge within the interaction, they produce similar processes and are similar in important respects (Jenkins, 2004, p. 15-16), however, there is a difference in studying them, because in the second case, not the content, but the sociocultural processes are important for theorizing (Vignoles, 2018). In addition, in some studies, ego (or felt) identity is also distinguished as a deep internal concept which is much more fundamental and holistic than individual identities (Côté, 1996). According to Goffman, this identity type is not necessarily avowed by the person or ascribed by a group, but is felt as an answer to the question "Who am I?" (Chriss, 2015), so, this facet of the identity is less concrete and image-oriented than the personal identity.

Identity can be both formed and discovered. There are many sources that are the ground for further self-identification in both cases: starting with genetic inheritance and personal potentials, and ending with suggestions and evaluation by important others. Trying a variety of roles is also the form of work with a personal identity, which is usually inherent in adolescence as a time of experimentation with goals, opportunities, values and beliefs (Waterman, 1984). The level of impact of different sources on identity formation processes has changed throughout the history of mankind. The identity also can be activated, triggered in social situations when the meanings of the environment match the meanings of the identity, and controlled by an individual in further activities, influencing one's behavior, moral choices and reactions on others (Carter, 2013).

Individual's self-identity is developed and transformed not only with the impact of the society, feelings and external circumstances, but also in the process of interaction with art and media. This impact and the very process of defining personal "self" has changed in the contemporary world with its constant transformations. Today's virtualization has created spaces with new types of interaction between people and communities, culture products, which has changed the process of personal development. The perception of one's self nowadays is unstable. People form



their images not only through real, but also through virtual attributes that sometimes are even more important for them. The emergence of information technologies contributed to the formation of the so-called virtual identity, an integrated self, created within the cyberspace, which may differ from the real self. Virtual identities are usually more dynamic and flexible than real ones (Nagy & Koles, 2014). In addition to identities formed to represent one's personality during online interaction, the development of virtual worlds led to the emergence of identities that go beyond the cyberspace and may affect the real life.

There are several concepts with the help of which we can refer to the identity connecting real and virtual worlds. This type of self-identity may be called "blended identity", when online representation is complemented not only with online, but also with offline personal characteristics, or "composed identity", when the virtual identity is not created, but upgraded from the real one (Chen & Lunt, 2021). A virtual self and its relation to the real one can be considered within one of three main paradigms: when the virtual self is constructed without complementing it with the details of the real self, when both of them combine, and when the virtual self-identity repeats the real one (Davis & Chansiri, 2018). However, all these options are not suitable for the self-identities formed within the videogame spaces, even despite the fact that some parts of the videogame culture, namely avatars, players' nicknames etc. may be considered as manifestations of the blended identity (Lim & Harrell, 2015). In case of the identification in the process of playing videogames and interacting with videogame culture, a person's experience offline or real life in general is not necessarily a basis for the identity formation. Moreover, in some cases, online experience vice versa becomes the main part of the real-life way of self-identification. Being a gamer, videogame developer or, for example, game journalist is the real position which is derived from the virtual space. All cases of identities formed within the videogame culture have their specific features, which change real social space, economics and even politics. That is why we see the necessity of the separate examination of the formation of different identities within the videogame culture.



### **Levels of videogame player identity formation**

Videogames are quite unique in comparison with other media. Their central feature is interactivity, which allows player to be not just reader or spectator, but a part of videogame worlds (Ogneviuk et al., 2022). In many games, player's decisions change in-game narratives or even the game world itself, making players responsible for events in virtual realities, which strengthens the influence on one's personality.

Games, streams, platforms that produce and sale videogames regularly take part in different social processes. They influence society, politics, and even religion, in the area of which the videogame space participates in the formation of attitude towards different denominations, establishment of new religious movements, that may be based on some in-game events, online spread of existing religious ideas etc. (Boren, 2016). Videogames can also be a tool of socialization and establishing social contacts, which are often maintained in the "real world" after playing. It was demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when videogames became one of the limited ways to communicate with others while staying at home (Zhu, 2020). The social nature of multiplayer videogames reduced the feeling of loneliness and distance, online videogames were a space to meet friends – at least in virtual game worlds. Videogames were useful to alleviate the feeling of isolation not only from the outside society, but also within the family (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2021). They became a means of relaxation, stress relief and normalization of mental health for many people at that time. Thus, videogames become a new means of communication, which, due to their interactivity, create a feeling of joint activity, belonging to a common cause, etc. Videogame communities are directly connected to the real world and may influence its processes. One of the example of this is the participation of videogame players and game sales platforms in sanctions against Russia's aggression (Browne, 2022). All this proves the significance of videogames for the contemporary society.

Videogames and phenomena formed by the interaction with them are parts of the so-called videogame culture. It consists of different culture products and subjects who create game products and interact with them in different forms: both in the process of direct playing and as spec-



tators of the playing process. The roles assigned during this interaction may be temporary (as in case of Let's Play or stream spectators) or form the specific self-identity that influences further real-life experience. The identities formed within the videogame culture can be divided into two groups: game consumers (players and spectators) and game developers. In this article, our attention is focused on players as the most influential category, which evaluates games, determines the game market and is directly involved into interaction with products of the videogame culture.

The most common bias connected with players is their equation to gamers according to their activities, which further labels everyone who plays videogames as gamers. Sometimes, the division is preserved, but without the clear delineation of the difference. For example, according to J. Grooten and R. Kowert, the concepts of "player" and "gamer" can be divided on the basis of the level of personal importance and duration of the effect of the socialization: "player" is a temporary, functional status, the role acquired by the subject while playing a videogame – thus, a person who has never played a videogame will be considered a player the moment he / she starts interacting with it; in contrast, "gamer" is a concept that reflects the long-term aspects of self-construction and self-perception, individual and social positioning (Grooten & Kowert, 2015). According to this statement, in case of a videogame player, games influence self-identity formation equally to other media and arts; their content is usually more important than inclusion into the videogame world, communication or the fact of playing itself. However, we cannot fully agree with both this idea and the consideration of player status as a temporary one.

To reveal the difference between identification of players and gamers, we would like to start with the definition of the "gamer" concept presented in the work "Cyberculture. The Key Concepts", which, in our opinion, describes the category of gamers quite successfully. So, a gamer is someone for whom playing videogames is a hobby or a serious activity. This term is considered to be used by those who actively interact with videogames within the videogame culture (Bell et al., 2004, p. 73). For gamers, both game consumption and creation of game-related products may be important; social sphere of gaming and competitiveness are also a



part of being a gamer, not just a player (Steltenpohl et al., 2021); the term “gamer” usually marks identity connected with videogames as an area of professional development or at least long-term interaction, the main focus of which is the acquisition of skills and achievements in the area, not just the process of playing itself (Milik, 2017).

As can be seen from both definition and specific features, the fact of playing videogames does not assign gamer identity to a person. Identifying oneself as a gamer occurs in social environment, and the very gamer identity includes special attitude towards videogames. However, being a gamer means being a player. So, we can talk about the formation of perceiving oneself as a player as a core for the formation of gamer identity. Being integrated into the videogame culture and communities through interaction with other gamers and / or creation of game-based products is also an important part of identifying a person as a gamer. Therefore, gamer identity is not just individual, but also social identity due to its close connection to the social communication and external activity. A videogame player can be focused on videogames and, at the same time, uninterested in representing oneself as a part of a virtual game-based community. The social nature of gamer self-identity changes its peculiarities as a hermeneutic subject of interpreting videogames from the point of view of the videogame hermeneutics. A person’s understanding of works of art is influenced by the social groups and public opinion, and when we talk about interpreting videogames, gamers often form their attitude on the basis of a community they belong to; at the same time, there is no need to take public opinion into account while interpreting personal experience of playing, which also makes the identity formation different. Considering all mentioned above, we see it important to study videogame player identity separately to understand how the main individual identity formed in the process of interaction with videogames emerges and to delineate its difference from gamer identity.

There is no proper definition of the videogame player because it is usually ignored in studies related to identities and social roles formed within the videogame culture. The identity formed during the interaction with videogames is usually considered less stable than gamer identity due to its possible temporary nature. It is focused not on the videogaming as



a separate phenomenon, but on personal experiences and impact of videogames on one's self. While a gamer is focused on the engagement in the videogame culture, player may enter and leave it freely without losing the identification with the group or community.

Players are usually divided into categories according to their preferences and in-game behavior. However, these are not the only features that form videogame player personality, and, therefore, the way of identifying oneself. In our study, we have distinguished several levels in player identity formation:

1. Videogame preferences;
2. Manner of playing;
3. Character / personal profile identity.

At first glance, the structure we propose looks similar to, for example, the identity structure of fans (Baker, 2009), however, there is an important difference between being a fan and a videogame player. When a person reads a book or watches a film, no specific skills are needed to perceive or understand it. The difficulties may arise in case of foreign language, unknown terms in the content, but generally, works of art do not require additional actions that are not a part of everyday life. Therefore, the content of artworks is defining for uniting people into groups of fans. In case of music, movie, book fans etc., their identities are usually connected with one group, genre or type of the media – therefore, with the particular content, but not with the particular type of interaction. There are no separate identities of fans of books or films, but we can talk about identities of rock fans, “Harry Potter” fans and so on. In case of videogame players, we talk about the specific social group united by the interaction with the culture product different from other media and forms of art and, therefore, by the specific interpretation of this interaction, particular experience of it. Videogames, unlike other forms of art, are aimed at the participation of the player in the events. The only genre that does not propose interaction at all is the so-called Zero Player Games (Björk & Juul, 2012), in which a player starts the game process and then acts as a spectator of the real-time gameplay that happens without his / her direct participation. Other videogame genres make a player the part of the videogame world and, at the same time, the actor of the multi-



component event which is quite the same for every videogame. So, in case of videogames, not only the content, but the very process of playing and immersion into it make a person a videogame player, contributing to the formation of the identity based on the player-game temporary or continuous interaction. The ability to interpret videogames also requires understanding of human-computer communication (Salin, 2018) and the gameplay as a sequence of inputs that are needed at least to start playing. Each person may have his / her own manner of this communication, due to which it is important to consider both way of playing and videogame preferences. This cannot be applied to other media, because it is difficult to describe specific manner of watching films or visiting theatres.

The level of character profile is quite optional in case of videogames where player cannot choose nicknames and characters' appearance, outfit etc. However, today many game selling platforms allow profile customizing, which makes this level relevant for analysis in our study. The following paragraphs describe the process of player identity formation in detail and reveals key features of each level.

So, when we talk about videogame preferences, it should be noted that player identity is formed by two main focuses: preferred content of videogames and game mechanic preferences. Videogame content includes main ideas, balance of narrative and ludic part, and such things as general theme, spatial and temporal setting etc. (Lee et al., 2014). Gameplay, which consists of player's possible activities and game responses to them (Fabricatore, 2007), not only forms player's perception of the game and ways of interpreting experience, but also becomes the basis for the second level of player identity formation.

In case of the manner of playing, formed by preferred game mechanics and genres, there are different adjectives used to describe player's (and gamer's) personality and preferences. These adjectives are used by gamers to communicate within communities and describe personalities of other gamers; for players, however, they act as a feature of self-identifying and further forming personality on the basis of previous game experience. It also forms an attitude towards self and others. For example, players may have a negative attitude towards those described by the term "casual player" – a player who prefers playing games not posing challenges. Indus-



try and certain individuals also use the term “hardcore player” to describe those who are most skillful in playing videogames (Bell et al., 2004, p. 73). Manner of playing may also vary with the dependence on videogame genre, presence of spectators etc. While for gamers, manner of playing is the necessary part of their social image, in case of players, it reflects their character, preferences and attitude towards the game.

In our opinion, a manner of playing also includes the interest in the so-called “additional content”, such as events outside videogames, lore information, challenges connected with the game and merchandise with videogame characters, symbols etc. Social pressure on gamers within the videogame culture results in the sometimes compulsory interest in details of videogame development and content related to preferable games. However, player may ignore this content if it is not interesting for him / her due to its optional nature. Therefore, even the interest to the additional content or the reason of its absence is an important part of the identity formation for a player.

Talking about character’s profile, avatars and nicknames as words with some specific names, distinguishing oneself from the others (Khrypko & Iatsenko, 2019), not all videogames give players the freedom to choose these settings. In many RPGs focused on the narration, like classical “Final Fantasy” series, player usually can change the characters’ names, but cannot create his / her avatar in the videogame world directly. This opportunity is also unavailable when a particular character is important for a videogame plot, therefore, the player is required to perceive it from their point of view. Sometimes, even changing characters’ nicknames can be the option given not to express player’s personality, but to reveal some details of the videogame world. Here, “Undertale” can be mentioned, in which the starting character’s name changes the NPCs’ responses and, in some cases, the gameplay itself. Due to this variety of approach to characters’ features, we can state that all of them constitute the videogame player identity, making him / her not only project themselves into game worlds, but also construct themselves from different personal details of in-game characters. All this may influence appearance of the player’s personal profile and nicknames on game selling platforms (e.g. Steam, Epic Games Store, Origin etc.). In case of players presenting



themselves, chosen look and profile details are an external reflection of his / her videogame preferences and experiences, therefore forming the third level and completing the identity formation.

Here, the difference between gamer and player identity is obvious. Due to the social nature, gamer's image usually passes through different games and, due to the number of games played and the importance of external expression, gamer may lose the deep metaphysical connection between him / her and avatar in the game world. Player, in turn, is often focused not in the external, social part of playing, but on the gameplay. Therefore, player's identity may be not the holistic commonality of avatars and characters, but the composition of selves with whom the person identifies oneself in the process of playing. The stories of these selves and the metaphysical connection between player and avatar (Day, ) possible even without customizing an in-game character, makes the player self-identity more complicated. Being gamer means having one central identity that is preserved through the experience of playing. In case of player, self-identity is constructed within the process of becoming, transferring oneself into the virtual body or even virtual creature under player's control. So, videogame player identity consists not of the awareness oneself as a player and construction of a generalized self, but of identifying oneself with the in-game character and living their lives, changing the attitude towards the videogame worlds and forming the internal self on the basis of the experience obtained from playing.

### **Conclusions**

Videogame player identity is one of the identities formed in contemporary cyberspace. It is different from identities of fans due to the interactivity of the phenomenon which lies in its ground. This self-identity plays the key role in the videogame culture due to players' defining role in its development.

In game studies, player identity is usually not separated from gamer identity. However, there is the great difference between them, which is important for proper studying videogame culture. The gamer identity can be considered as social identity which usually consists of community-oriented activities, such as producing game-based content, communicating and competing with other gamers etc. All of this is optional for the



videogame player identity.

We have distinguished three main levels of the player identity formation. The first one is the level that includes videogame preferences. Not only genres and content are important for its formation, but also gameplay and game mechanic preferred by a player. Gameplay details become the basis for the manner of playing, which is the second level of the videogame player identity. We have expanded this level to not only the way a player acts in a videogame, but also his / her interest in the so-called “additional content”, which changes many videogame worlds, but is not necessary for playing a videogame itself. The third level, namely characters’ features and personal profile, consists of avatar(s), nickname(s) and all external manifestations of the videogame player identity. It is the main level that connects player and gamer identities, providing the transfer from the individual and external identity to the social identity.

There is a need to continue study on each of the levels we distinguished separately. Being mutually connected, they create the basis for being a videogame player and for further constructing the gamer identity in the area of social interaction. Therefore, further research of the player identity and its relation to gamer identity, their interaction and balance will help in creation of the general methodology for videogame philosophy.

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**Öz:** Makale, video oyunu oyuncu kimliğinin felsefi ve hermenötik analizine ayrılmıştır. Çalışmanın amacı, video oyunu oyuncusu kimliğinin genel özelliklerini ortaya çıkarmak, onu oyuncu kimliğinden ayırmak ve oluşumunun ortak düzeylerini tanımlamaktır; buna dayanarak video oyunu felsefesinin daha ileri metodolojisi, basmakalıp görüşler olmadan oluşturulabilir. Bunu başarmak için, genel olarak kimlik kavramına uygulanan sınıflandırma ve sistemleştirmenin yanı sıra analiz ve sentez ve özel olarak oyuncu öz kimliğine yönelik çalışmalar kullanılmıştır. Yazarlar, oyuncu kimliğini hermeneutik terimlerle ele alarak, oyuncu kimliği oluşumunun ana düzeylerini, yani video oyunu tercihleri, oynama şekli ve karakter / kişisel profil kimliği olarak tanımladılar. Tüm bu seviyeler, yalnızca kendini tanımlamanın bireysel bir yolu olarak oyuncu kimliğini oluşturmakla kalmaz, aynı zamanda oyuncu kimliğinin daha fazla yaratılması için bir zemin görevi görür.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Video oyunu, oyuncu, video oyunu yorumbilimi, kimlik oluşumu, video oyunu oyuncu kimliği.

