UNIVERSITÄT AUGSBURG
Universitätsbibliothek

OPEN ACCESS
OPUS AUGSBURG

Games without frontiers: a framework for analyzing digital game cultures comparatively

Ahmed Elmezeny, Jeffrey Wimmer

Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Elmezeny, Ahmed, and Jeffrey Wimmer. 2018. "Games without frontiers: a framework for analyzing digital game cultures comparatively." *Media and Communication* 6 (2): 80–89. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i2.1330.

Nutzungsbedingungen / Terms of use:

CC BY 4.0

Dieses Dokument wird unter folgenden Bedingungen zur Verfügung gestellt: / This document is made available under these conditions:
CC-BY 4.0: Creative Commons: Namensnennung
Weitere Informationen finden Sie unter: / For more information see:
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de

COGITATIO

Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)
2018, Volume 6, Issue 2, Pages 80–89
DOI: 10.17645/mac.v6i2.1330

Article

Games without Frontiers: A Framework for Analyzing Digital Game Cultures Comparatively

Ahmed Elmezeny * and Jeffrey Wimmer

Institute of Media, Knowledge and Communication, University of Augsburg, 86159 Augsburg, Germany;
E-Mails: ahmed.elmezeny@phil.uni-augsburg.de (A.E.), jeffrey.wimmer@phil.uni-augsburg.de (J.W.)

* Corresponding author

Submitted: 28 December 2017 | Accepted: 14 March 2018 | Published: 7 June 2018

Abstract
Currently in game studies there is a gap in frameworks for comparatively researching game cultures. This is a serious shortcoming as it ignores the transcultural and transnational aspects of games, play and their cultures. Based on Hepp's (2009) transcultural framework, and Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay and Negus's (1997) circuit of culture, this article proposes a structure to comparatively analyze game cultures. This procedural method comprises several steps determining specific contexts of game culture and their categories for comparison. Each step is illustrated with a case example. Finally, we recommend placing game cultures on a transnational spectrum, which helps in suggesting that many digital games express both local and international characteristics.

Keywords
comparative analysis; game culture; game studies; mediatization; transculturality; transnationality

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Games Matter? Current Theories and Studies on Digital Games", edited by Julia Kneer (Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands) and Ruud Jacobs (University of Twente, The Netherlands).

© 2018 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

The area of games studies is robust after extensive research has been conducted in the past couple of years. Game cultures are usually studied and documented independently, whether in an explorative approach like Taylor's ethnography of EverQuest (2006), or in observing specific social arrangements like Jakobsson's study of Smash Bros. console clubs (2007). When analyzing digital games and their cultures, it is important to consider their transnational aspects, due to growing rates of online play where national boundaries are becoming less relevant. This growing international importance of games is mainly attributed to the processes of globalization and digitalization, since individuals are no longer limited to playing with their immediate social circles, but instead are constantly communicating and playing with others around the globe.

Game cultures are neither totally national nor global, retaining some qualities from both classifications. This can be observed in nationally appropriated game cultures of a certain game. For instance, members of the FIFA game culture in Germany share certain characteristics with FIFA gamers in the UK. This assumes that FIFA game culture is not really a global culture manifesting the same way everywhere in the world and neither is it completely localized. The overall FIFA game culture has certain qualities shared by several localized game cultures worldwide, while still having specific characteristics that only manifest locally. This assumption applies to a multitude of other game cultures, whether single or multiplayer, offline or online. With lightning-fast Internet mediated communication, game cultures today are experienced globally, but the interesting question is: how far they are truly "global" or appropriated by national subcultures. We are quick to assume that if games are experi-

enced by multiple game communities in different nations then they are international or vice-versa. Hence, it is important to examine how global or local these cultures are, and what drives these characteristics.

Currently there is a research gap in comparative game studies. This is a serious shortcoming as it ignores the transnational aspects of games, play, and their specific cultures. The experience of individual gaming in local, everyday contexts is structurally connected to a transnational and highly commodified game system (Šisler, Švelch, & Šlerka, 2017). Games (unlike other types of media) are a hybrid of communication and entertainment, with unique societal influences and a significant impact on the formation of individual identities (Hand & Moore, 2006). Digital games are entertainment applications of digital media that comprise specific qualities, especially characteristics of interactivity and simulation. Gaming encompasses an object (medium), as well as multiple forms of computer-mediated and face-to-face communication (ranging from interpersonal to "let's plays" and mass media communication). Researchers looking at game cultures not only have to pay attention to game related dimensions, but also increasingly to real-world contexts, due to the advanced possibilities of online gaming. Van Looy (2010) hints at the importance of other contexts when questioning if there is more than just forms of play connecting games and society.

While Hepp (2009) developed a framework for the comparative study of media cultures, the simple application of this framework to game cultures is not sufficient. Game cultures require certain additional aspects to be addressed, which are unique to this medium and do not apply to other media cultures; like defining game culture on a micro, meso or macro level. We propose a procedural method for the comparative study of game cultures to address these gaps. Our suggested analytical framework gives researchers a protocol to follow in order to provide both a holistic and detailed study.

Still, why study games and their cultures comparatively? Finding commonalities and differences within game cultures from different countries (or even games) helps explore the idea that game cultures are not bound by national (or non-territorial) borders but instead exist as a global, united subculture. Certain game cultures can even be described as a cultural cross section, similar to folk, high and urban cultures. However, more than just assessing the global or local aspects of game cultures, studying them allows us to look at specific characteristics that relate to superordinate processes such as individualization, globalization, commercialization and mediatization (Hutchins, 2008; Simon, 2006). This article will first highlight and define the basic elements of the framework: defining what game cultures are, their contexts, and transculturality as a perspective. Then, we will outline the basic steps in our process, giving examples when possible. Finally, we discuss the framework, its application and its limitations.

2. Digital Game Cultures from a Theoretical Perspective

Shaw (2010) published an article investigating the definition of game culture. She surveyed academic literature and mainstream press to provide a concrete definition but instead provides several based on: who plays, what they play, or how they play. Today, the situation is not much different. Academics utilize various definitions based on the specific context of their research. Heuristically, there are different levels of complexity concerning digital gaming. These could be arranged on a continuum between game and society, from the micro to the macro level, without implying a certain hierarchy or specific determinism. For our framework, we provide a system for defining game cultures based on the reassessment of other game cultures and broader media cultures. This falls in line with Mäyrä's suggested explanation of game culture: "rather than a single 'game culture,' there are several of them, as visible and invisible sense-making structures that surface not only in games themselves, but in the language, practices and sensibilities adopted and developed by groups and individuals" (2006, p. 103). Of course, the boundaries between different game cultures are not fixed (as each form of media culture does not have fixed borders). Thus, determining how far digital games are integrated in everyday life of gamers, and what social network structures or participative actions they create, is crucial. These issues are gaining rapidly in importance because of the increasing potential of digital games for connectivity, interactivity and collaboration on a global scale.

While both academics and mainstream discourse define game culture heterogeneously (Shaw, 2010), we suggest that game culture can be differentiated based on macro, meso or micro characteristics (see Table 1). When defining game cultures on the micro level, the approach acknowledges the culture of one specific game or community. For example, a study can focus on a specific game, such as the game culture(s) of World of Warcraft or Super Smash Brothers. Or by locality, such as the game culture of a specific community in a town or city. Or even as a combination of both these aspects, such as the World of Warcraft game culture in Germany. Examples of studies defining game culture on the micro level, and accordingly investigating them as such, are abundant. Research looking at specific phenomena in World of Warcraft is plentiful, like Prax (2010) who looks at leadership styles in guild raids, Brown (2011) who observes cheating and erotic role-players, or Sheng-Yi, Yu-Han and Chuen-Tsai (2012) who study multiple character management of World of Warcraft gamers.

Characterizing game cultures on the meso level entails finding common aspects or features that span different games and communities. After the groundbreaking study by Taylor (2006) where she applies a meso level definition of game culture (multiplayer game culture), several other studies follow suit, utilizing a definition that includes several games and communities. Lin and Sun

Table 1. Various levels of defining game cultures.

Level of game culture definition	Description	Example cultures
Micro	Cultures of a specific game or community	World of Warcraft culture, EVE online culture. Or game cultures of a specific locale, e.g. California Smash Brothers culture, German FIFA culture.
Meso	Cultures of multiple games or communities with a common, unifying characteristic	PS4 gamers, Nintendo gamers, Retro gamers, Modders, Hackers, Speed Runners
Macro	The overall culture of games, gamers and gameplay	Game culture worldwide, or whole game culture of specific countries, e.g. South Korean, American or European Game Culture.

(2007) analyze player discourse surrounding the "magic circle" in free-to-play games. Silva (2012) also does the same when studying ludic shopping, through applying a concept of game culture that includes several social network games. Moreover, looking at eSports and related phenomena, Simon (2013) refers to fight gamers, or those who play fighting games, as a distinct culture and community separate from eSports. Finally, Quandt, Grueninger and Wimmer (2008) observe adult players of several games, who belong to various game communities and cultures. Hence, as seen from the work of several academics, a meso level approach to game culture is possible when there is a unifying factor present, whether it is between the participants (age or gender), the genre of game, or method of play (console or PC, modding or speed running). The unifying factor doesn't necessarily have to relate to the game itself (Lin & Sun, 2007; Taylor, 2006) but it can also be a factor associated with gamers (Quandt et al., 2008), or the community (Simon, 2013).

Utilizing a definition of game culture on a macro level attempts to characterize the entirety of gamers (and certain aspects of their culture) as a whole. This is applicable when we attempt to study or observe game culture with questions like "what does it mean to be a gamer?" or "how do gamers communicate?" With questions like these, the applied definition of game culture is a macro one, assuming that all players of all games (even casual ones) share similar characteristics and behaviors that justify their characterization as a culture. Academics utilizing this definition in their work are also quite common. Juul (2010), for example, utilizes this definition of game culture when talking about the casualization of games and their players. In his study of the World Cyber Games, Wimmer also provides a macro definition by characterizing game culture as a whole: "We can define digital game cultures as an aspect of the current media culture with increasing significance, whose primary resources of meaning are manifested in digital games that are mostly mediated or provided through technical communication media such as handhelds or consoles" (2012, p. 527).

2.1. Contexts of Digital Game Cultures

It is important to note that games and their cultures do not exist separately and should, ideally, be studied within certain contexts to understand them better. King and Krzywinska (2006) state: "Gameplay does not exist in a vacuum, any more then games do as a whole. It is situated instead, within a matrix of potential meaning-creating frameworks. These can operate both at a local level, in the specific associations generated by a particular episode of gameplay and in the context off broader social, cultural and ideological resonances" (p. 38). The importance of context is considered by several game studies academics, such as Juul (2005) and Taylor (2006), or Mäyrä (2008) who expresses that the study of games should focus on the interactions between the game and gamer, as well as the occurring contexts from this interaction. Contexts should be especially acknowledged in order to understand game culture holistically.

Building on Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay and Negus (1997), and Hepp's (2011) general work on media cultures, Mitgutsch, Huber, Wimmer, Wagner and Rosenstingl (2013) suggest five domains to be utilized in the study of digital games and their cultures. The contexts of production, representation, appropriation, identification and regulation are a complex circuit that are interweaved and continuously affect each other. These contexts can be seen as articulations of specific game cultures, which are always "historically, temporally and spatially rooted and contextualized" (p. 10):

- The context of (re)production (of and within digital games) deals with the structures and methods of creating games and play. This context is not limited to the gaming industry and the field of game development alone but also deals with user generated game content. Examples of studies dealing with this context include; Simons and Newman (2003) who look at video game cultural and textual production online, or Lehdonvirta (2009) who notes

attributes that drive purchase decisions in games with micro-transactions;
- The context of representation deals not only with the depiction of digital games in public discourse and mass media, but also with the illustration of different topics in media products, such as: violence, family values or gender roles in digital games. Studies dealing with this context include McKernan (2013) who looks at the coverage of videogames in the New York Times from 1980 onwards;
- Regulation, as a context, involves the actions of non-producing institutions, like political or governmental institutions, and their effect on game culture. This context usually deals with issues such as age restrictions for games or the Entertainment Software Rating Board's (ESRB) ratings. Studies dealing with the regulation context include Jordan, Buente, Silva, and Rosenbaum's (2016) ethnography, which considers various types of regulation regarding in-game transactions;
- The context of appropriation highlights the process of how games are embedded into daily life. This includes occurrences such as game-specific rules and rituals. Example studies dealing with appropriation include Wimmer and Nickol's (2013) study on the sports management game Hattrick, and Lin, Sun and Tinn (2003) who look at gaming clan behavior;
- Finally, the identification context denotes the ongoing process of building identity based on the dialogue or patterns communicated in games. The process is best observed when individuals don special clothes, or use specific jargon to display their membership of a community, or to differentiate themselves from non-gamers. Here example studies include Shaw's (2013) case study on the videogame play of women who do not identify as gamers, and Wimmer and Sitnikova's (2012) research on the identity of game industry professionals.

In addition to offering a more holistic image of digital game cultures, the analytical consideration of these contexts also provides a systemization of certain phenomena that can be studied over a number of game cultures. An examination of the production contexts reveals external conditions, social practices and ideologies that influence the development of a game. The analysis of game texts, representation and rule structure, sheds light on how game models propagate social models, preferred lifestyles and implicit values or norms. The context-sensitive study of the appropriation of digital games can illustrate the variability of readings, the variety of creative and productive practices, and different forms of creating meaning and pleasure. It is important to state that these contexts do not exist in a linear process, they are continuously ongoing and influencing each other. One prototypical example of how these contexts overlap is fan production (Jenkins, 2006). Fans are well known for producing immaculate works of art or fiction in tribute of their favorite games and media products. In the realm of games, fans even modify their favorite games, write detailed guides or manage dedicated wikis; otherwise known as fan scholarship (Thomas, Zagal, Robertson, Bogost, & Huber, 2009). These activities fall within two cultural contexts: (re)production, since this context considers the production of user generated content, and appropriation; because it deals with how games are utilized in ways other than play, or how they are rooted in the lives of their players. This circuit, with its entwined contexts, describes not only the genesis of game cultures, but also the day-to-day processes of their members.

Game cultures and their contexts can be examined individually but can only be understood in their full complexity if they are observed as a comprehensive process of changes, expressing itself in the ever-evolving forms of media and communication. Therefore, digital games fit well into the context of the processes of mediatization, individualization, globalization, and commercialization (for this basic argument, see Simon, 2006), which are currently reshaping society and our everyday life (for an overview, see Krotz, 2017). Digital games are arguably one type of medium which bolsters social change, especially as they become more intertwined in the lives of individuals; utilized in a variety of ways, and continually discussed and re-appropriated. Gamers spend countless hours communicating with both other players and non-player characters in games, with communities focused solely on the discussion of games and their content. Hence, the cultures of games provide opportunities to understand the influence this interactive medium has on identity construction, social relations, political processes and even society as a whole. Supporting this insight of the complex connection between game reality and societal reality, Hand and Moore (2006) point out the duality (Anthony Giddens) of game experience and game contexts in connection with game culture: "Digital gaming may be seen as both embedded within existing sociocultural frameworks (as 'cultural artifacts'), and as enabling novel articulations of community and identity to emerge (as forms of 'culture'). Digital gaming represents a distinct cultural form which at once problematizes current understandings of community and identity, and allows us to explore emerging patterns of community and identity formation" (p. 180).

2.2. Transnationality and Culturality of Games as a Research Perspective

As mentioned earlier, game studies usually focus on one game culture at a time and comparing cultures is not a common process. Of course, game cultures are well described concerning individual dimensions in specific settings, such as the fields of juvenile gamers, girl gamers (Shaw, 2013), massive multiplayer online games (Brown,

2011), and participatory game cultures like the modding scene (Poor, 2013). Still, few research has attempted to compare video game practices in different cultures, such as Taylor's (2011) look at Halo 3 game cultures around the world or Šisler et al.'s (2017) study on gaming in Czech Republic and Iran. Šisler et al.'s comparison is innovative, but while they provide a new quantitative method for comparison (normalized social distance on social network sites) and pinpoint aspects to compare (video game production and consumption), their framework focuses on the cultural industry and materiality (hardware, software, game development etc.), lacking the holistic contextual approach we suggest (for other case examples, see Jin, 2010; Kerr, 2017). Wolf (2015) provides snapshots into the gaming environments and cultures of different countries worldwide. However, the account of each country focuses on divergent aspects and the overall comparison is not uniform. Quandt, Chen, Mäyrä and Van Looy (2014) provide a comparison of gamers from four different countries (Germany, Flanders, Singapore and Finland) and while they use standardized testing to note similarities and differences between these gamers, they do not address other contexts of game culture, such as user-generated content, or representation of games in public discourse. Though this is not necessarily negative, it limits the comparison to only players and their preferences, meaning that it is not—in a sense—a game culture comparison. Our framework hopes to address gaps in previous comparative games research by providing a holistic and systemized way of comparing game cultures, which considers all of their necessary contexts, allowing researchers to select appropriate ones based on their research interests.

Not all games and their cultures are created equal. Certain social rituals, rules and languages do not necessarily span across multiple cultures. Therefore, the influence certain cultures have on issues, such as identity construction or social relations, are not constant. A game could be heavily dependent on cooperative play, making it an ideal community and culture for social interaction, while the same game played elsewhere might foster competitiveness and rivalry instead. Each resulting game culture can, in theory, promote completely different rituals, rules and languages. These differences between game cultures, whether based on locale or the game itself, are where a need for our comparative framework arises.

3. Digital Game Cultures from an Empirical Perspective

Dealing with media cultures in general, Hepp (2009) provides a framework where it becomes "possible to conduct comparative research on (territorial) national media cultures as well as on other (deterritorial) forms of present media cultures" (p. 1). He notes that this sort of comparison is extremely beneficial in realizing cultural articulation and power relations (Hepp, 2009). The first step in Hepp's framework is to analyze cultural patterns (p. 9). Comparing manifold is the next step, and during this stage it is important to expand the comparison to more than just "binary semantics of national comparison" (p. 10). The third and final step involves criticizing the data in a multi-perspective manner (p. 11). We add to Hepp's three-step processes in an attempt to tailor the approach for game cultures. We suggest a procedure of defining game culture, limiting the scope of analysis to certain contexts, pinpointing which phenomena to look at, and placing the game cultures on a transnational spectrum. This is done in hopes of clarifying the comparative process, restricting it to specific phenomena, and finally, indicating the degree of transnational or local nature of the analyzed culture.

3.1. Defining Game Culture

As mentioned before, defining game cultures is a heterogeneous process heavily based on the interests of the researcher. The comparative analysis can only begin when the researcher completes defining his game cultures. In the case of a macro definition of game culture, we can still conduct a comparative analysis with macro cultures from different nations, defining it as the overall game culture of all games and comparing existing ones in Germany to other nations, for example. However, comparisons are not only possible within physically distinct locations, but also digitally distinct ones. This means that the comparative framework is suitable in comparing cultures of different games and communities simply by defining game culture on a micro or meso level. Even when both games have a player base in the same country, they can still be compared, because they are ultimately different game cultures. For example, using this framework, one can compare the World of Warcraft culture in Germany to EverQuest or any other game played in the country. Therefore, the first step in our framework is to define two (or more) game cultures for comparison. This can be done on the micro, meso or macro level; with game cultures being characterized on national boundaries, games played, method of play or even the players themselves.

Nevertheless, the cultures defined for comparison do not always have to be characterized on the same level, which means that macro-defined cultures can be compared to micro ones. This is an extremely beneficial consideration, so that cultures can be compared and investigated within different research contexts. For example, one can compare the representation of certain topics in two micro cultures from different Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG), like World of Warcraft and The Elder scrolls online. Or alternatively, one can also observe the dimension of representation in one MMORPG compared to the meso culture of the genre as a whole. Either way, once the cultures for comparison have been defined, the researcher should then pinpoint a context for investigation applicable to both cultures.

One thing to note is that defined cultures can also overlap. In a previous study conducted comparing

'trolling' in two nationally distinct online gaming communities, we defined game cultures on the macro level; as the overall game culture of Russia or Brazil: encompassing several games, gamers and ways of play, as well as on the micro level: as nationally distinct cultures of anonymous game message boards (Elmezeny et al., 2018). When defined cultures overlap, like in our case, researchers should be careful in attributing characteristics to specific communities. However, through comparing cultures of interest (see 3.3 below) researchers are able to pinpoint where specific characteristics of each culture lie.

3.2. Investigating One or More Contexts

This step in the process involves investigating a context of game cultures that will be compared by the researcher. As mentioned earlier, each context entails specific observable phenomena and articulations of culture. The application of this framework means that researchers can choose to limit their comparison to one context, which provides a clear and straightforward approach to the comparative study. However, the indication of contexts does not always need to be limited to just one. The five aforementioned contexts are constantly affecting each other, and together they communicate game culture as a whole; hence, more than one context can be investigated at the same time. Researchers can compare multiple contexts across cultures, and while this approach is not limited to specific phenomena, it provides a systemization of the contexts of culture to be compared.

During the investigation of specific contexts, the researcher looks for articulations of culture within their compared samples. This includes looking at specific patterns within discourse, actions and classifications regarding a certain context of game culture. For instance, in investigating the identification context, a researcher can observe the specific actions, writing and arguments behind a player's identification and membership within a certain game community. Hepp's (2009) framework suggests that the comparison manifold span beyond just national semantics, and with these contexts, we have the ideal categorization for other comparative aspects beyond the territorial. Phenomena within the contexts of game culture can also manifest on a micro, meso or macro level (see Table 2). We suggest defining indications on these levels to simplify the comparative aspect addressed by the researcher. When looking at the context of production, one is not sure if they are looking at the production by game companies, user-generated content, or cooperative work. Through specifying which contextual level is addressed, researchers can pinpoint their research interest to be compared and standardize it across cultures.

For our previous study comparing two nationally distinct online gaming communities, we investigated their trolling behavior through a content analysis of message board posts on similar forums (chans) (Elmezeny et al., 2018). Since we were interested in 'trolling' behavior specifically, we limited our investigation to two specific contexts of these cultures: appropriation and representation. Appropriation was selected because it relates to the question of how gamers behave and utilize game content online, and representation because it shows how certain topics are handled and received in public discourse. These phenomena manifest on a meso (community habits and representation in specific channels) and micro level (personal habits or rituals).

3.3. Comparing Investigated Contexts

Once the researcher has investigated the contexts to be paralleled for each game culture, they can begin their comparative analysis. Initially, the researcher should start by preparing the comparison manifold. This includes structuring the data into social units, whether looking at data from individuals, organizations or other equivalent entities. Moving forward, the researcher then begins to compare the different cultures by noting and analyzing cultural patterns. During this step, Hepp suggests to take care in answering whether a certain pattern is "national specific, transculturally stable or characteristic of a deterritorial community" (2009, pp. 11–12). This means contextualizing the results of the comparison within various and potentially different cultural commonalities. These commonalities could relate to territorial levels (local, national, global characteristics, etc.) or on a non-territorial level (different kinds of games or genres).

To avoid a self-serving, normative perspective, Hepp proposes, "focusing on the construction processes of cultural articulation" (2009, p. 11). To do so, it is important to observe how the noted cultural patterns assist

Table 2. Manifestations of contextual phenomena on various levels.

Level/Context	Production	Regulation	Identification	Appropriation	Representation
Macro	Industry production	Industry standards	Overall cultural identity	Cultural features	In mass media and public discourse
Meso	Cooperative development	Subculture rules	Community or clan identity	Community habits or rituals	In specific mediums or channels
Micro	User generated fan content	Individual/ Self-regulation	Personal Identity	Personal habits or rituals	In specific games or game related publications

in the construction of the game itself. This construction by cultural patterns leads the culture (and the game itself) to be centered around different aspects, whether territorial aspects (with national game cultures) or non-territorial aspects, such as a specific game or shared interest. It is also essential to focus on how the cultural patterns analyzed relate to hierarchies of power (Hepp, 2009). Power relations within game cultures should be noted, such as instances of dominance or other hierarchies, since games and their cultures provide an interesting environment for power struggles to manifest.

It is important to note that during the comparative process, the researcher can also observe phenomena that are not centered on power relations. Should the researcher be interested in more communicational or appropriation aspects of the culture, they are free to pursue these patterns instead. For our previous study comparing trolling in Russian and Brazilian online gaming culture, we primarily compared topics and situations that instigated trolling, as well as strategies, or types of trolling (Elmezeny et al., 2018). Using existing literature on trolling, we constructed a codebook for the qualitative analysis of board posts, and once we analyzed an equal number of posts from both communities, we compared our findings to find commonalities and differences between both game cultures. Still, we find Hepp's point of looking at relations of power relevant to other phenomena. For example, for those who are interested in comparing the representation of certain topics in two game cultures (such as depictions of a specific gender or violence against certain groups) should make considerations for power-relationships. A researcher can do this by analyzing the connection between the publishing company's acceptance of certain topics or how members of the game culture perceive them.

3.4. Placing Game Cultures on a Transnational Spectrum

In our framework, we address gaps in media and game culture research by assuming that these cultures are neither totally national nor international, and that they share some of both characteristics. Hence, we suggest that once the comparative study has been completed, the researcher should place the analyzed game cultures on a transnational spectrum, with one end labeling cultures as nation-specific as possible and the other as transcultural as possible. This step in the process is optional and suggested for those comparing game cultures on a territorial basis. For the comparison of micro cultures based on a specific game, or meso cultures based on players or methods of play, the spectrum can be adapted with non-territorial labels. This means that one end of the spectrum characterizes the culture with unique features that are not applicable to other game cultures, while the other end labels the culture as sharing qualities with others.

For those comparing national game cultures, it is important to remember that the decision for a culture being ultimately national or transnational should be based on more than just similarity to country stereotypes. For example, what makes a game culture of Germany localized is not the punctuality of their members, but manifestation of certain phenomena not existent in game cultures found in other countries. By avoiding comparisons to national stereotypes, researchers can prevent faulty labels and generalizations. Nevertheless, certain descriptions have to be stated on what makes a culture national or not. In our perspective, it is more beneficial to analytically explain (and state) descriptions of what makes a culture localized to a specific country, than to attribute them to national stereotypes. In the case of our study comparing trolling in Russian and Brazilian online gaming cultures, we did not contrast our findings with national stereotypes, but with each other instead (Elmezeny et al., 2018). Once we had done that, we were able to pinpoint aspects that existed in both cultures, such as similar trolling strategies or responses to certain topics. After finding a large number of similarities in the trolling methods of both communities, we concluded that the nationally distinct game cultures should be placed more towards the transnational end of the spectrum.

4. Discussion and Outlook

In this article, we presented one possible procedural method that can be utilized in the comparative study of digital game cultures. Building on Hepp's (2009) framework for the comparative study of media cultures, we address gaps in his work, as well as in comparative games research, through providing additional steps that help define terms and certain aspects in the comparative pursuit of game cultures.

It is important to note that this is not the only way to conduct a comparative study of game cultures and that there exists other appropriate approaches and perspectives. While our framework is not the only method of studying game cultures comparatively, it provides analytical advantages geared for game studies. Initially, the use of game culture contexts provides a well-rounded and inclusive analysis. This is especially true for researchers investigating more than one context at a time, who are able to observe several related phenomena and their influence on each other. For those who are interested in only one context, the framework assists in the proper and precise definition of the research object. Having a well-defined research object helps the researcher in a more balanced comparative analysis, while at the same time, stops the researcher from becoming overwhelmed. Finally, the application of this framework allows the researcher to utilize theory from several other disciplines based on their research interest, equipping them with more analytical tools and a greater body of literature to relate their findings.

The merits of a comparative game culture analysis are plentiful. For one, the transcultural perspective helps in making "very different power-related processes of cul-

tural articulation accessible in a critical manner" (Hepp, 2009, p. 12; see also Kraidy, 2005). Comparing territorial game cultures will also allow us to observe the existence (or absence) of a global game culture. Should national cultures share several characteristics, it can lead to the assumption of the existence of a global culture not bound by any territorial borders. Or alternatively, it can label game cultures as a cultural cross-section similar to folk, high or urban culture: existing globally but with different local manifestations.

Ultimately, looking at game cultures comparatively provides us with the opportunity to note specific characteristics of each culture and how they relate to metaprocesses such as mediatization, globalization, individualization and commercialization. Not only can comparative studies provide us with empirical cases observing these social transformations, but they can also provide insights on the nature of the relationship between them and the creation, lifetime and death of games and their cultures.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Brown, A. (2011). *Players and the love game: Conceptualizing cheating with erotic role players in World of Warcraft*. Paper presented at the 2011 DiGRA International Conference: Think Design Play, Utrecht, The Netherlands. Retrieved from www.digra.org/dl/db/11312.34300.pdf

Du Gay, P., Hall, S., Janes, L., Mackay, H., & Negus, K. (1997). *Doing cultural studies: The story of the Sony Walkman*. London: SAGE.

Elmezeny, A., Wimmer, J., Tribusean, I., Oliveira dos Santos, M., Levina, E., & Antonova, A. (2018). Same but different: A comparative content analysis of trolling in Russian and Brazilian gaming communities. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Hand, M., & Moore, K. (2006). Community, identity and digital games. In J. Bryce & J. Rutter (Eds.), *Understanding digital games* (pp. 241–266). London: SAGE.

Hepp, A. (2009). Transculturality as a perspective: Research media cultures comparatively. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *10*(1). Retrieved from http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1221/2657

Hepp, A. (2011). *Cultures of mediatization*. London: Polity Press.

Hutchins, B. (2008). Signs of meta-change in second modernity: The growth of e-sport and the world cyber games. *New Media Society*, *10*(6), 851–869.

Jakobsson, M. (2007). *Playing with the rules: Social and cultural aspects of game rules in a console game club*. Paper presented at the 2007 DiGRA International Conference: Situated Play, Tokyo, Japan. Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/playing-with-the-rules-social-and-cultural-aspects-of-game-rules-in-a-console-game-club

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Exploring participatory culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Jin, D. Y. (2010). *Korea's online gaming empire*. Oxford: MIT Press.

Jordan, P., Buente, W., Silva, P. A., & Rosenbaum, H. (2016). *Selling out the magic circle: Free-to-play games and developer ethics*. Paper presented at the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG, Dundee, Scotland. Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/selling-out-the-magic-circle-free-toplay-games-and-developer-ethics

Juul, J. (2005). *Half-real. Video games between real rules and fictional worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Juul, J. (2010). *A casual revolution: Reinventing video games and their players*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Kerr, A. (2017). *Global games: Production, circulation and policy in the networked era*. New York, NY: Routledge.

King, G., & Krzywinska, T. (2006). *Tomb raiders and space invaders. Videogame forms and contexts*. London: Tauris.

Kraidy, M. (2005). *Hybridity, or the cultural logic of globalization*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Krotz, F. (2017). Explaining the mediatisation approach. *Javnost: The Public*, *0*(0), 1–16. http://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2017.1298556

Lehdonvirta, V. (2009). Virtual item sales as a revenue model: Identifying attributes that drive purchase decisions. *Electronic Commerce Research*, *9*(1/2), 97–113. doi:10.1007/s10660-009-9028-2

Lin, H., & Sun, C. (2007). *Cash trade within the magic circle: Free-to-play game challenges and massively multiplayer online game player responses*. Paper presented at the 2007 DIGRA International Conference: Situated Play, Tokyo, Japan. Retrieved from www.digra.org/dl/db/07312.38207.pdf

Lin, H., Sun, C.-T., & Tinn, H.-H. (2003). *Exploring clan culture: Social enclaves and cooperation in online gaming*. Paper presented at the 2003 DIGRA International Conference: Level Up, Utrecht, The Netherlands. Retrieved from www.digra.org/dl/db/05163.31010.pdf

Mäyrä, F. (2006). A moment in the life of a generation (why game studies now?). *Games and Culture*, *1*(1), 103–106.

Mäyrä, F. (2008). *An introduction to game studies*. London: SAGE.

McKernan, B. (2013). The morality of play: Video game coverage in The New York Times from 1980 to 2010. *Games and Culture*, *8*(5), 307–329.

Mitgutsch, K., Huber, S., Wimmer, J., Wagner, M., & Rosenstingl, H. (2013). Context matters! Exploring and reframing games and play in context—An introduction. In K. Mitgutsch, S. Huber, J. Wimmer, M. Wagner, & H. Rosenstingl, (Eds.), *Context matters! Exploring and reframing games in context. Proceedings*

of the 7th Vienna games conference (pp. 9–16). Vienna: New Academic Press.

Poor, N. (2013). Computer game modders' motivations and sense of community: A mixed-methods approach. *New Media & Society*, *16*(8), 1249–1267.

Prax, P. (2010). *Leadership style in World of Warcraft raid guilds*. Paper presented at the 2010 International DiGRA Nordic Conference: Experiencing Games: Games, Play, and Players, Stockholm, Sweden. Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/leadership-style-in-world-of-warcraft-raid-guilds

Quandt, T., Chen, V., Mäyrä, F., & Van Looy, J. (2014). (Multiplayer) gaming around the globe? A comparison of gamer surveys in four countries. In S. Kröger & T. Quandt (Eds.), *Multi-Player: The social aspects of digital gaming* (pp. 23–46). London: Routledge.

Quandt, T., Grueninger, H., & Wimmer, J. (2008). The gray haired gaming generation: Findings from an explorative interview study on older computer gamers. Games and Culture, 4(1), 27–46.

Shaw, A. (2010). What is video game culture? Cultural studies and game studies. *Games and Culture*, *5*(4), 403–424.

Shaw, A. (2013). Rethinking game studies: A case study approach to video game play and identification. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *30*(5), 347–361.

Sheng-Yi, H., Yu-Han, H., & Chuen-Tsai, S. (2012). *Main(s) and alts: Multiple character management in World of Warcraft*. Paper presented at the 2012 International DiGRA Nordic Conference: Local and Global: Games in Culture and Society, Tampere, Finland. Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/mains-and-alts-multiple-character-management-in-world-of-warcraft

Silva, S. (2012). *Buy and share! Social network games and ludic shopping*. Paper presented at the 2012 International DiGRA Nordic Conference: Local and Global: Games in Culture and Society, Tampere, Finland. Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/buy-and-share-social-network-games-and-ludic-shopping

Simon, B. (2006). Beyond cyberspatial flaneurie: On the analytic potential of living with digital games. *Games and Culture*, *1*(1), 62–67.

Simon, F. (2013). *eSport and the human body: Foundations for a popular aesthetics*. Paper presented at the 2013 DiGRA International Conference: DeFragging Game Studies, Atlanta, USA. Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/esport-and-the-human-body-foundations-for-a-popular-aesthetics

Simons, I., & Newman, J. (2003). *All your base are belong to us: Videogame culture and textual production online*. Paper presented at the 2003 DIGRA International Conference: Level Up, Utrecht, The Netherlands. Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/all-your-base-are-belong-to-us-videogame-culture-and-textual-production-online

Šisler, V., Švelch, J., & Šlerka, J. (2017). Video games and the asymmetry of global cultural flows: The game industry and game culture in Iran and the Czech Republic. *International Journal of Communication*, *11*, 3857–3879.

Taylor, N. T. (2011). Play globally, act locally: The standardization of pro Halo 3 gaming. *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology*, *3*(1), 282–242.

Taylor, T. L. (2006). *Play between worlds: Exploring online game culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Thomas, D., Zagal, J., Robertson, M., Bogost, I., & Huber, W. (2009). *You played that? Game studies meets game criticism*. Paper presented at the 2009 DiGRA International Conference: Breaking New Ground, London, UK. Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/you-played-that-game-studies-meets-game-criticism

Van Looy, J. (2010). *Understanding computer game culture: The cultural shaping of a new medium*. Latvia: Lambert Academic Publishing.

Wimmer, J. (2012). Digital game culture(s) as prototype(s) of mediatization and commercialization of society: The World Cyber Games 2008 in Cologne as an example. In J. Fromme & A. Unger (Eds.), *Computer games and new media cultures: A handbook of digital games studies* (pp. 525–540). Dordrecht: Springer.

Wimmer, J., & Nickol, J. (2013). Sports videogames in everyday life: A meaning-oriented analysis of the appropriation of the online soccer manager game Hattrick. In M. Consalvo, K. Mitgutsch, & A. Stein (Eds.), *Sports videogames* (pp. 236–251). London: Routledge.

Wimmer, J., & Sitnikova, T. (2012): The professional identity of gameworkers revisited. A qualitative inquiry on the case example of German professionals. *Eludamos*. *Journal for Computer Game Culture*, *6*(1), 155–171.

Wolf, M. (Ed.). (2015). *Video games around the world*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

About the Authors

Ahmed Elmezeny is a lecturer at the University of Augsburg's institute for Media, Knowledge and Communication. Currently, he is conducting his doctoral research on free-to-play games and their cultures. His research interests include online communication, public relations, videogames and digital cultures.

Jeffrey Wimmer is professor for communication science with emphasis on media reality at the University of Augsburg, Germany. His main research interests are sociology of media communication, digital games and virtual worlds, public and counterpublic spheres, mediatisation and participation. Jeffrey Wimmer fulfilled several empirical studies and published widely on the link between digital media, appropriation and public spheres. From 2009 to 2015 he was chairing the ECREA-section "Communication and Democracy" and the DGPuK-section "Sociology of Media Communication".