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Title

Beyond the Industry. A Bordieuan Cartography of the Video Game Field.

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Introduction

Jennifer Whitson (2020) argues that game studies researchers have contributed—whether consciously or unconsciously—to reproducing a stereotypical image of the video game industry within academic discourse. This reproduction is partly rooted in the sources of information that structure our training and research practices: design textbooks, postmortems, and academic accounts of video game development. As a result, prevailing understandings of video game production as an industry within game studies are often shaped by hegemonic and partial perspectives (Whitson, 2020). However, over the past decade this image has begun to lose its explanatory weight. In this context, Brendan Keogh’s *The Videogame Industry Does Not Exist* (2023) explicitly problematizes the explanatory value of the video game industry as a concept:

“The videogame industry” as a concept, as a defined and distinctive area of commercial activity, only accounts for a small, particularly lucrative, and geographically concentrated aspect of gamemaking activity while failing to account for a much broader and complex range of gamemaking identities, cultures, and sites. (p. 3)

Keogh (2023) invites us to understand the creation of video games, as well as all related activities, under the concept of field. This proposal goes beyond a simple change of nomenclature; what it involves is restructuring our understanding of videogame creation according to the theoretical and methodological logic of Pierre Bourdieu. The advantages of this approach are clear: “The videogame field instead exposes a larger, more complex picture of numerous, diffuse sites of videogame production that are obscured when we only consider those positions that fit neatly within “the videogame industry” (p. 152).

Of course, Keogh is neither the first—nor will he be the last—to examine the production, distribution, and consumption of video games through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical framework. Prior to his work, several important studies have laid the groundwork: Consalvo (2007), who introduces the concept of *gaming capital*; Kirkpatrick (2015), who establishes the notion of a *gaming field*; Johnson (2010), who explores a dominant *habitus* within video game production, articulated through the concept of *technomascularity*; Parker et al. (2018), who apply the idea of *cultural mediators* and their role in the consecration of cultural fields; and Olgado (2019), who plants the seed for studying the *field of video game preservation*, among others. Each of these investigations draws on concepts from Bourdieu’s theory, with particular emphasis on the triad of *field*, *capital(s)*, and *habitus*. However, these studies tend to focus on specific domains or concepts, presenting themselves as individual pieces of a broader puzzle.

As is usually the case when looking with fresh eyes, it's inevitable to feel lost in the face of the new territory stretching out before us: the video game field. This article aims to propose a cartography that moves beyond the reductive notion of “the video game industry” and instead conceptualizes the field of video games. This cartographic proposal is grounded primarily in a theoretical review of how Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts have been taken up within game studies, and is further informed by reflections derived from an ethnographic research experience conducted at Frog Studio¹, an indie game development team based in Barcelona. The article is divided into three sections. In the first, we examine how the concepts of *field*, *capital(s)*, and *habitus* have been used by numerous researchers in game studies and the conclusions they have drawn. Then, in the second section, we establish a cartography (Bourdieu, 1993; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) grounded in theoretical and methodological principles. This cartography allows us to trace the contours of the video game field, highlighting its *translocal* and situated character,

as well as the dispositions, cultural practices, and subjectivities that shape it. Finally, in our conclusions, we will highlight the scope, limits and areas of opportunity that present themselves to us in the field of video games.

Field, Capital(s) and *Habitus* in Game Studies.

Since the 1980s, Pierre Bourdieu's ideas, contained in his books *Distinction* (1987) and *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), have been fundamental references in the study of cultural practices. It's not surprising that game studies, with its inter- and transdisciplinary nature, would draw on his thinking to learn about the consumption, production, and distribution of video games; after all, in the 21st century, new modes of *social distinction* are closely linked to digital media consumption. In the following, we will examine the main research studies that have been built on or inspired by a Bourdieusian theoretical framework. For the purposes of analysis, we group the research according to the central term they use, based on the triad: field, capital(s), and *habitus*.

Field

Analytically, a field (*champ*) constitutes a network of objective relations between positions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As historically contingent spaces, fields are neither universal nor static (Steinmetz, 2018). Their emergence hinges on a collective belief—or *illusio* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992)—that the social space is worth competing within. This *illusio* rests on two foundational agreements among field actors: (1) the types of capital (power) specific to the space, and (2) its boundaries. Once these conditions are negotiated, the field attains consecration—an autonomous status distinct from other social spheres.

These foundational agreements are neither permanent nor immutable; the field remains a site of perpetual struggle among dominant and dominated positions over their definitions; what

Steinmetz (2018) terms "*dominant principles of domination*." While each field operates under unique logics, all share a fundamental struggle over boundaries: who qualifies as a legitimate participant. In cultural production, for instance, this manifests in conflicts over who merits recognition as an *artist* (Bourdieu, 1993).

Based on this analysis of the field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993), Keogh (2021) emphasizes the importance of border control within the video game field and, consequently, the struggle over the dominant definition of the video game maker:

the field of videogame production can be understood as the site of struggles in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of videogame maker and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the legitimate videogame maker. (p. 118)

This struggle to impose the dominant definition is structured around two contradictory principles of hierarchization: the heteronomous principle and the autonomous principle. The first states that success is tied exclusively to commercial metrics – sales figures, chart positions, and consumer recognition. As a counterweight, the autonomous principle of hierarchization emerges, according to which success is found in peer recognition and guild consecration, creating what Bourdieu (1993) describes as an inverse prestige economy where producers gain status through their disinterest in commercial success.

Keogh (2023) argues that the field of video game production has historically been governed by the heteronomous principle. However, recent technological and economic shifts have challenged this hierarchy: the advent of accessible engines (Unity,

Unreal, Godot), alternative distribution platforms (Steam, mobile app stores, Epic Store, Itch.io), and lower production costs have enabled more autonomous production models. Consequently, as Keogh (2023) observes, “the videogame field has now entered a period of what I call *intense in/formalization*, defined by a blurring of relationships and positions that gamemakers now occupy between the formal and informal—between the need to strive for autonomous (cultural) and heteronomous (economic) modes of success.” (p. 36, italics in original).

Expanding his analysis beyond production, Keogh examines two additional zones: university education programs and embedded cultural workers (Cunningham, 2014). In educational contexts, a fundamental tension emerges between framing game development as either artistic practice (arts) or technical discipline (technology). Meanwhile, embedded cultural workers - game makers applying their skills across creative industries (Cunningham, 2014) - occupy a liminal position that requires constant identity negotiation. These professionals face a crucial trade-off: while enjoying greater economic stability through service work, they typically relinquish rights to their intellectual property - a sacrifice that fundamentally redefines their professional identity within the field.

Another field proposal can be found in the historical analysis of Graeme Kirkpatrick (2015), who is interested in determining the moment when video game consumption became a consecrated and autonomous field. Challenging conventional narratives, he argues that the crash of the American industry in 84' is far from being the black chapter in the history of video games, since in other geographical latitudes, especially in the UK, the foundations of gaming culture were laid in what he considers a "heroic" period. The greatest achievement of this period was the

establishment of a terminology for evaluating video games as cultural artifacts with their own artistic and technological qualities. Early reviews of video games in magazines such as Computer and Video Games (CVG), Commodore User (CU), Zzap!, and Crash emphasized aspects such as graphic quality, audio design, certain aspects of storytelling, and the "feel" of the game in general, but it wasn't until 1985 that the concept of "gameplay" was established as the cornerstone for distinguishing video games from the rest of the media. "At the centre of this is the idea of 'gameplay', the central term of game evaluation through which the *illusio* of this field is established." (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 24). It is from this gameplay-based *illusio* that video games are established as a practice of *distinction*, and this is the moment when the "gaming field" is established.

Another historical approach can be found in the proposal of Kobayashi and Koyama (2020), who examine 1980s Japanese independent game production through an adapted field theory lens. Departing from Bourdieu's strict definitions, they conceptualize a field simply as "*a space where people with similar interests interact*". Their study highlights how Japan's unique conditions—particularly *doujin* events and *Soft Bender TAKERU* distribution machines—enabled an independent production field to emerge decades before similar ecosystems developed elsewhere. As they argue: "The hobbyist production field played a role as a 'proto-market' (Toynbee, 2000) that produced motivation for game production, various capitals (work [game], social relationships, knowledge, reputation and money), professionals (makers, writers, and editors) and game companies" (p. 79). This configuration not only sustained independent makers but generated the cultural and economic capitals necessary for a distinct production field to coalesce.

For their part, Felan Parker, Jennifer Whitson, and Bart Simon (2018) analyze Megabooth as a paradigmatic case of cultural mediation, building on Smith Maguire & Matthews' (2012) reformulation of Bourdieu's (1987) *cultural intermediaries* concept. In its original sense, Bourdieu (1987) posits cultural intermediaries as an emerging class of social distinction whose practices oscillate between bourgeois and popular culture. This term is reworked by Smith Maguire and Matthews (2012) to refer to those actors positioned between consumption and production who derive value from mediating the consumption, evaluation, and access to cultural goods by other actors in the field. A fundamental aspect of cultural mediators is that they are defined as experts who are able to consecrate a work.

Overall, Parker et al. (2018) argue that Megabooth's consecration as one of the industry's most important cultural mediators is due to the work and efforts of Kelly Walick, who has been able to perform the fundamental task of a cultural mediator: negotiating between two distant and disparate worlds “independent makers and large corporations”. While Parker et al. (2018) avoid explicit field terminology, we contend that MegaBooth operates within a broader subfield of *cultural intermediaries* - one whose distinctive logic emerges through game curation as its fundamental form of capital. This subfield's central struggle revolves around the power to consecrate, as cultural intermediaries like MegaBooth compete to define which games merit recognition as "worthy" of exhibition, thereby shaping the very boundaries of legitimate independent production.

Recently, we find proposals for fields that go beyond the notions of video game distribution, consumption, and production. This is the case of Benedict Olgado (2019), who invites us to think of video game preservation as a field that is still in the process of formalizing itself and, therefore, acquiring its autonomy. Olgado notes that the central conflict from which

the field structures itself has to do with the very definition of the video game: “Video game preservation questions the very ontology of the video game [14]. What is it precisely that we pertain to when we speak of a video game? What are its significant properties that determine what ought to be preserved?” (p. 413). This struggle manifests in two competing preservation paradigms: (1) maintaining playability (ensuring games remain functional), versus (2) accepting playability's inevitable loss while preserving documentation (videos, images, texts) as historical record. These opposing approaches represent competing "principles of domination" competing to structure the video game preservation field. While Olgado maps these tensions between cultural institutions, producers, and consumers, further research must track the field's formalization - particularly its emerging capital forms and position-takings - as preservation establishes its distinct logic.

Capital(s)

Capitals are the currency of each field, determining the position of each actor through its possession or absence. For Bourdieu (1996), capital takes four basic forms:

- 1) *economic capital* (money by decree or in the form of economic goods).
- 2) *social capital* (connections, contacts and relationships available to an individual in the field).
- 3) *cultural capital*, which manifests itself in three different forms: a) in *objectified* state, manifested in cultural goods valued in the field; b) in *institutionalized* state, the titles and diplomas awarded by educational institutions; and c) in *embodied* state this capital is defined as a *disposition* acquired throughout the subject's life and manifested in learning, skills and attitudes socially valued.

4) *symbolic capital*, which is the possession and recognition of the capitals described above, or in other words, the status a person acquires by possessing the species of economic, social and cultural power (Bourdieu, 1996).

Recently, thanks to the reflections generated by the theories of intersectionality, authors such as Helga Nowotny (1981) have developed the notion of *emotional capital*, which is defined as knowledge and skills focused on the emotional care of oneself and one's loved ones.

Within game studies, Mia Consalvo, in her book *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (2007), proposes the concept of gaming capital to understand how players conceive and practice the consumption of video games: “[...] is a reworking of Pierre Bourdieu’s “cultural capital,” which described a system of preferences and *dispositions* that ultimately served to classify groups by class” (p.4). Gaming capital thus represents a field-specific form of cultural capital - the accumulated knowledge, skills, and dispositions players acquire through sustained game consumption. This informal yet systematic cultivation enables gamers to develop both the physical competencies and cognitive schemas needed to interact seamlessly with any game within the field.

According to Consalvo (2007), gaming capital circulates between players and the industry through the *paratextual industry*², which includes specialized magazines, guides, video game events, specialized communities, and digital forums.² In agreement with Kirkpatrick (2015), during the 1980s, thanks to video game magazines, gaming capital had a central point of accumulation and valuation: “Whichever route a player took, Nintendo Power was there to guide and shape expectations about the proper gaming capital, and the proper way to play (and win) video games” (p. 24, italics in original). This cultural mediation converted gaming capital from

anecdotal, individual knowledge into an institutionalized form of symbolic power specific to the gaming field.

However, as Consalvo critically examines, this system has naturalized problematic field-specific ideologies, particularly the gendered conflation of masculinity and gaming skill. Gaming publications, recognizing their predominantly male audience, consciously tailored content to reinforce this demographic bias. Over time, the dialogue between video game developers, paratextual industry, and players became structurally gendered, systematically positioning male players as the default possessors of gaming capital, while other identities faced exclusion.

The term “gaming capital” has been evaluated and reformulated by Walsh and Apperley (2008) and by Sotamaa (2010), who argue that Consalvo’s (2007) original formulation is limited as it primarily considers cultural capital. These authors suggest that a more comprehensive approach should take into account all five forms of capital proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1996). For instance, economic capital enables access to consoles, games, and high-speed internet, which in turn expands players’ opportunities to participate in gaming communities and accumulate recognition (Walsh and Apperley, 2008). Sotamaa (2010) further nuances the concept by emphasizing differences among player types and the ways in which they interact with, consume, and attribute value to specific in-game elements, such as trophies and achievements. More recently, gaming capital has been mobilized as a multimodal concept encompassing the various forms of capital identified by Bourdieu (Korkelia et al., 2023). It has been applied across different areas of the field, including analyses of Overwatch player forums (ibid.) as well as studies of the knowledge and technical competencies deployed by developers in the process of game creation (Huang & Liu, 2021).

Habitus

Conceptually, *habitus* constitutes a system of durable *dispositions* - embodied patterns of perception, thought, and action - shaped through both formal education and informal socialization (Wacquant, 2018). Put simply, *habitus* is a disposition³ of action that each subject learns throughout his or her life, in which social contexts and learned meanings of class/race/gender are fundamental. It should be noted that *habitus* is never a mechanical replica of social structures; each person experiences different contexts that reinforce or break our *habitus*, resulting in inconsistencies. Moreover, a *habitus* does not mechanically determine an actor's position; it is merely an indication of how easy or difficult it will be for a subject to navigate social space. Within game studies, *habitus* has emerged as a prominent analytical framework, predominantly applied to two key subfields: video game production and game consumption

In the area of production, one of the most important references is the ethnographic study conducted by Robin Johnson (2010, 2013) in the US studio Dynevolve, which had 75 employees. Johnson (2010), in accordance with Keogh (2023), notes that one of the main characteristics of video game production - a field he calls "the field of digital game production" - is the control of access to new developers. This control in the field is at the root of gender segregation, which is evident in the huge disparity between male and female gamemakers, as well as in the nature and organization of work. A clear example is that at Dynevolve, at the time of his ethnography, only one woman, Rebecca, was working on a project as an interface coder (Johnson, 2013). Rebecca's case is common in development studios; according to Deuze et al. (2007), most women in studios work in feminized positions such as human resources, receptionist positions, and marketing. Johnson (2013) notes that when asked about this gender

gap, employees at Dynevolve take it for granted that “‘girls’ often do not have ‘the right ideas’ when it comes to games but that it ‘looks good’ for a developer to employ ‘some girls’” (p. 203).

This *a priori* exclusion of women and anything symbolized as feminine, whether consciously or unconsciously, is the result of the most common dispositions (*habitus*) manifested and valorized by video game developers around masculine performativity. Johnson (2018) explains that within the study, hegemonic masculinity, and particularly the mastery of technology, is exalted as the essential characteristics of a (masculine) developer. This creates a bar of exclusion, as makers who don't perform this type of *habitus* will face disproportionate challenges in career advancement, particularly in attaining leadership positions.

Building on these findings by Johnson (2018) and drawing on Keogh's (2023) conception of the "video game production field," John Foust (2024) analyzes the lawsuit filed by the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) against Activision Blizzard in 2021 to determine the extent to which misogyny and gender violence were common dispositions (*habitus*) within the company. To achieve this goal, he draws on the concept of *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu, 2002), which consists of subtle and sometimes imperceptible practices that normalize and reinforce a symbolic order between the dominant and the dominated, leading vulnerable people to continue to perceive themselves negatively in interaction; an example of this is behavior aimed at belittling femininity by both men and women. Foust (2024) categorizes documented misconduct into three concepts: aggression (behaviors recognized "universally" as unacceptable), harassment (more subtle practices such as jokes or comments that obscure seriousness and intentionality), and structural sexism (invisible organizational practices that systematically marginalize women, for example by limiting promotion or recognition based on presumed incapacity or as punishment for resisting sexist norms). All of these practices, while

not common to all employees, are perceived as something that "happens" and reinforce the idea of a misogynistic *habitus* within Activision Blizzard. The most important aspect of this analysis is to emphasize that even when we address the most visible behaviors of aggression and harassment within an institution, symbolic violence can still be exercised with impunity through structural sexism.

Another of the most common *dispositions (habitus)* in video game production is the normalization of *crunch* - an extraordinary production period during which makers work overtime, up to 70 hours a week, sometimes without pay. Amanda Cote and Brandon Harris (2020), after conducting a discourse analysis of *Game Developer* magazine (2000 - 2010), found that over the past two decades, *crunch* has been described by the industry's leading makers as natural and unavoidable. According to Cote and Harris, three types of discourse normalize this practice. First, developers perceive a lack of control over their work, either because game development is framed as an inherently creative and chaotic endeavor or because production schedules are dictated by publishers rather than studios. Second, producers often articulate a disdain for corporate structures and formal employment, a stance that has concrete material effects, such as the absence of labor frameworks that protect workers' rights. Finally, in line with Johnson (2013, 2014, 2018) and Keogh (2023), makers construct an identity centered on passion for video games; this rhetoric of passion operates as a key mechanism of affective exploitation that effectively transforms structural exploitation into perceived vocational privilege. Through this process, workers come to internalize precarity as the natural cost of pursuing their passion.

Regarding the consumption of video games, Kirkpatrick (2015), as part of the analysis of his *gaming field*, explains how the first consumers – initially termed "game testers," later "gamers" - developed distinct dispositions through their engagement with this new medium,

forming what he identifies as the *gamer habitus*. This habitus crystallized around two core competencies: technical mastery of gameplay mechanics and the cultivated ability to discern quality titles. According to Kirkpatrick (2015), in the early days of describing and delineating this *habitus*, magazines didn't have such strong gender connotations; however, from 1987 on, media and trade magazines adopted an explicitly masculine discourse, associating skill in games with masculine prowess and thus codifying the medium as a field made by and for men.

Recently, Ever Figueroa (2024) has been interested in analyzing how this masculine *habitus* presents itself in video game sports competitions known as eSports, specifically at EVO. The author conducted an ethnographic observation at EVO 2019, which took place from August 2-4 at the Mandalay Events Center in Las Vegas, Nevada. Drawing on Nick Trujillo's ideas about five frames of reference for masculinity in sports (physical force and control, occupational achievement, frontiersmanship, patriarchy, and heterosexuality), Figueroa suggests that eSports is a space where each of these frames of reference is enacted in its own way. For example, physical strength and control are reframed in terms of dexterity and management of the chosen avatar, while heterosexuality is manifested through the hypersexualized design of female and male characters that respond to a heterosexual male gaze. Figueroa's findings show once again that in the field of video games, both at the level of production and consumption, one of the most common *dispositions (habitus)* is one based on the idea of a hegemonic heterosexual masculinity, where anything considered feminine is looked down upon.

How do we approach the video game field?

Cartography as a theoretical/methodological proposal

Bourdieu was a visual thinker, and in most of his texts we'll find diagrams and schemes that synthesize his ideas on a subject in a very specific way. In particular, the diagram on the field of

cultural production in France in the second half of the 19th century (Bourdieu, 1993) gives us the idea of cartography as a fundamental theoretical/methodological proposition for entering and getting to know a new field. In what follows, we propose a mapping of the current state of the field of video games that can operate as a reference for future research.

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To map a space, a starting point must be determined. The problem, echoing Keogh's (2023) ideas, is that until recently the "industry" was the only visible or at least explorable terrain. By opening ourselves to the idea of the field, we open to the possibility of new spaces, new people, and new experiences. With this shift in conceptualization comes an important challenge: How does one locate oneself in this new field? Throughout this text, we have presented various conceptualizations as points of reference: production (Keogh, 2023), gaming (Kirkpatrick, 2015), preservation (Olgado, 2019), hobbyists (Kobayashi and Koyama, 2020), and cultural intermediaries (Felan et al., 2018). Each of these definitions indicates specific boundaries and demarcations, and although some approaches find points of juxtaposition, it is important to clarify that these terms are not interchangeable with one another (Keogh, 2023). This is why, despite these references, it is still possible to get lost in the field

Our proposal thus centers on conceptualizing two analytical scales. The first, operating at a macro-general level, is what we term *the video game field*. We define it through a Bourdieusian lens as: a network or configuration of positions whose cornerstone lies in the *illusio* that considers video games as a unique cultural object worthy of distinction, which grants differentiation to those who consume them (gaming field), produce them (production field or hobbyist field), teach and learn about them (educational field), preserve them (preservation field), or those who evaluate and circulate them (cultural intermediaries).

The second scale, micro-specific in nature, comprises the diverse zones (segments or subfields) constituting the video game field. Each zone maintains its own boundaries, its own capital(s) and, above all, its own contestation of the dominant principles of domination. For example, we know that the space of consumption (gaming) has as its central struggle the determination of who can be called a real gamer and who is only a casual or fake gamer, while the space of production, as Keogh (2023) shows, has as its central struggle the determination of who can be enshrined as a video game maker.

This micro-scale analysis permits granular specificity tailored to research needs. For example, within "cultural intermediaries" subfield: platforms like Twitch or YouTube each constitute distinct ecosystems governed by unique legal frameworks, monetization structures, and—most critically—algorithmic architectures. Similarly, distribution channels like the App Store, Itch.io, and Steam function as localized platforms with particular logics. The essential criterion for such micro-level analysis remains the presence of four constitutive elements: (1) mechanisms of boundary maintenance, (2) field-specific capital formations, (3) contested principles of domination, and (4) relational position-takings among agents.

Based on this idea, we propose an initial cartography [Figure 1], created from the pieces provided by the authors discussed in this text. This proposal is neither final nor definitive; names and demarcations can (and will) change; our proposal seeks to establish the visual image of a field that can be mapped in its constant transformation, in order to determine new zones, disputes, capital(s) and *habitus*. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) remind us that the production of a cartography, and thus a map, is an open, decomposable and modifiable process, unlike tracing. A map does not claim to be reality but rather allows the explorer to adapt to the constant changes in the terrain.

Geographic latitude and temporality as reference principles

Delimiting one's position within the video game field requires careful consideration of two fundamental dimensions: geographical specificity and historical temporality. As Aphra Kerr (2017) demonstrates in *Global Games*, the video game industry constitutes an international market rooted in local contexts - each with distinct characteristics and historical trajectories of emergence. This *translocal* dynamic reveals the intrinsic interdependence between scales - where global phenomena only fully emerge when read through local particularities, just as local contexts derive their meaning from global industry flows. Consequently, merely identifying the location within production or consumption zones proves insufficient; precise geographical latitude (national, regional, or even the specific city) become essential for accurate field mapping.

In addition, temporality must be emphasized, as Bourdieu (1993) mentions, the only thing we can know about a field is *the state* at the moment we approach it, but since the field is a struggle, there will be constant changes, especially fields of cultural production tend to be more prone to transformations. An example of this are historical approaches such as those of Kirkpatrick (2015) or Consalvo (2007), which offer fundamental approaches to the media magazines of the 80s and 90s. Although many of the aspects they highlighted can probably be found today, it is necessary to be sensitive to the passage of time within the media specialized in video games. Therefore, a good cartography takes into account three aspects: location on the field, geographical latitude and temporality. In this sense, our proposal [Figure 1] would be a cartography of the video game field (in general) with a global view and whose temporality would be delimited in the state of the field between 2020-2025.

[Figure 1]

Speaking of capital(s)

The concept of gaming capital proposed by Consalvo (2007) and reformulated by Walsh and Apperley (2008) and Sotamaa (2010) has been used as an umbrella category that encompasses all types of skills, attitudes, and forms of learning valued across different subzones of the video game field. Taking up Consalvo's (2007) original concept, we note that for her, gaming capital circulates between consumers and the paratext industry, and we can recognize it in specific actions such as: knowing the location of an easter egg, motor skills in a game that could translate into high scores, knowledge of magazines and the paratext industry itself, and mastery of categories to distinguish a good game from a bad one. However, gaming capital has transcended this initial approach and has come to be used indiscriminately across multiple segments of the video game field to describe skills as diverse as the technical skills of art design, gameplay, programming, management, and even knowing how to translate social situations into playable mechanics is considered to fall under the concept of gaming capital (Huang & Liu., 2021).

This ubiquity of the concept reflects a major conceptual error described by Wacquant (2018) in relation to Pierre Bourdieu's thesis, namely the fetishization of theoretical terms over empirical work. In the case of gaming capital, Consalvo (2007) was on the right track by proposing this concept based on the data observed in his research, but currently the concept is so diluted by its indiscriminate use that the category ends up naming everything and nothing. Our suggestion is to take a few steps back, not to take gaming capital as the starting point, but to make it the arrival point. To do this, it is commendable to go back to basics and recognize the different types of capital that are possible, starting with five of them: economic, social, cultural, emotional, and symbolic. Each of these has clear boundaries and are therefore mutually exclusive, allowing for precise codification. Particularly in the case of cultural capital, where

Consalvo (2007) proposes gaming capital, the author's example should be followed to identify, name and categorize, through rigorous empirical work, the specific skills, knowledge and attitudes that are valued as cultural capital in a particular subfield, be it consumption, production, distribution, etc. For example, according to Consalvo (2007) and Kirkpatrick (2015), skill and mastery of the mechanics of a particular game constitute valued cultural capital in the gaming zone, especially when it involves e-sports (Figuerola, 2024). However, there is evidence that in the production zone, gaming skills are not as valued as knowledge about the levels, mechanics, and design aspects of specific games, what O'Donnell (2014) calls *game talk*, which is considered a *lingua franca* among makers that allows them to communicate and explain ideas within projects in a simpler way. Molecular identification of these skills may allow researchers to determine which ones are specific to each zone and, consequently, where boundaries can be drawn. By further localizing this identification within each zone, cultural capitals, such as passion for video games, which are valued in several subfields simultaneously will gradually be recognized (Cote and Harris, 2020, Johnson, 2013, Kirkpatrick, 2015). At this point, conceptual choices can be made: (1) expanding "gaming capital" to encompass universally valued competencies like passion across field positions; (2) restricting the term to Consalvo's (2007) original formulation of skills circulating between gaming and cultural mediation spheres; or (3) developing new capital classifications distinguishing production-specific from consumption-specific valuations. While this theoretical choice remains open for debate, our approach consistently treats gaming capital - or any newly proposed capital form - not as a predetermined framework but as a conceptual discovery emerging from field analysis.

There isn't ONE habitus

Habitus is one of Pierre Bourdieu's most widely used concepts, but also one of the most difficult

to interpret. Theoretical confusion generally stems from two difficulties that go hand in hand: first, the assumption that there is only one universal *habitus* in a given field, and second, the assumption that all individuals in a field or in similar social conditions respond to each and every one of the characteristics of that *habitus*. These errors lead, for example, to concepts such as the "suburban *habitus*" or the "metropolitan *habitus*" proposed in urban studies and criticized by Wacquant (2018b) through satire, as if it were possible for each of the millions of possible inhabitants of a city to share the same universal *habitus* to the letter. In this sense, it's necessary to approach Kirkpatrick's (2015) term "gamer *habitus*" with caution, because even if there are people who adhere to all the dispositions of a "branded" gamer to the letter, not all subjects in the field of consumption or who consider themselves gamers conform to this *habitus*.

To avoid these conceptual errors, we propose to think *habitus* through the concept of *disposition*, which Bourdieu (1993) establishes as the simplest definition of the term. In this way, we believe that each individual in a field has multiple socially acquired dispositions that change over time, and in many cases, not all subjects in the same field conform to all the dispositions of their peers. A clear example is given by Johnson (2018) who describes *technomascularity* as a common disposition among Dynevolve developers, but in the study Rebecca does not display such *disposition* and even goes so far as to avoid being in spaces like Beer Friday's where this type of masculinity is manifested; of course, by not having this disposition Rebecca resists its effects, but the point remains that subjects in the same field do not share the same universal *habitus*. According to Bourdieu (1993), this is particularly true in fields of cultural production where there is great variability between the possible dispositions of artists or, in this case, video game makers. Other positive examples of how to understand *habitus* can be found in Keogh (2023) when he considers passion as a common but not universal disposition among video game

makers, as well as in Cote and Harris (2021) in the case of crunch, or in Foust (2024) and Figueroa (2024) who find that misogyny is a fairly common disposition among video game makers and esports participants.

Crunch is a largely normalized practice within the production field, operating across both autonomous and heteronomous settings (Edholm et al., 2017). At the same time, indie production spaces appear to be more inclusive than those described by Johnson (2018), for example in our city Barcelona initiatives such as FemDevs, La Madriguera, Sant Jordi Jam, and PowerUp+, among others, actively work to increase the participation of women, LGBTQ+ communities, and people of color in game creation. This highlights the importance of remaining attentive to the most common dispositions that structure the fields we inhabit and, simultaneously, of identifying ways to disrupt and reconfigure the habitus that sustains them.

There's no wrong starting point

Mapping the field of video games is a task in which everything has to be done at once: identify boundaries, recognize and categorize capital(s), identify positions and positionings, and describe the most common dispositions (*habitus*). However, Wacquant (2018b) suggests that it is not only possible but desirable to decouple the concepts. As a first step, he suggests choosing the concept or concepts that best illuminate our research question. There is no hierarchy, order, or universal starting point; each researcher must do the epistemic/methodological work to understand and choose the concept that will allow a dialogue with the data found. It is these detailed, in-depth analyses, such as those of Consalvo (2007), Kirkpatrick (2015), and Keogh (2023), that provide researchers with a solid foundation from which they can later assemble a broader picture, such as the mapping we propose. For this reason, the proposed theoretical/methodological process is a

constant dialectic between the generation of specific conceptual analyses that will then be contextualized in the mapping of the video game field.

The video game field needs new naming practices

If the central aim of conceiving the video game field is to challenge the image of the industry as the sole site of production (Keogh, 2023), this challenge must extend to all the concepts associated with it. For example, within video game production there are many varied ways of naming workers, whether through specific positions (designer, artist, coder, manager, tester) or a more general concept such as 'developer'. However, both ways are strongly associated with a particular production model linked to the most hegemonic industry. The specialization and formal differentiation of roles emerges primarily in large-scale development studios, where organizational structures necessitate precisely defined positions like user interface programmer, 3D environment artist, or level designer - each with distinct skill requirements and workflow responsibilities. In independent production or local scenes, makers usually end up performing multiple tasks, and a single label doesn't do justice to their work. The same goes for the idea of "developer," which has been used as a generic term to talk about industry workers, a label that has been repeatedly rejected by alternative production spaces (Keogh, 2023). Currently, within game studies there are alternative proposals to name those who create video games such as "game production" (Sotamaa and Svelch (2021) or "gamemaker" (Keogh, 2023). In this sense, it is important to listen to how people refer to themselves and how they define their work. A definition should not be imposed based on the role of the researcher, because even the most well-intentioned attempts to find alternative terms to "development" end up being a positioning that should not be normalized. It is necessary to be in constant epistemic reflection because no

concept, whether theoretical or a way of naming someone's work, is neutral; every label is a positioning in the video game field.

Methodological Challenges in the Video Game Field

As Jennifer Whitson (2020) argues, “learning how to make games is ultimately situated, embodied, and context dependent” (p. 19). Reaching this level of analysis, however, poses significant challenges within game studies. Large production companies are often reluctant to engage with research, and when access is granted, it is frequently constrained by NDAs that limit both methodological approaches and the scope of available information (O’Donell, 2014). In indie production, by contrast, teams are often so small and decentralized that there are no stable offices or shared physical spaces, reducing opportunities to observe everyday practices beyond interactions mediated through platforms such as Discord, Notion, Slack, or Gather.

These conditions point to a fundamental challenge in studying the video game field: the need to refine our methodological tools in relation to the material and organizational realities of production. This does not imply abandoning techniques such as interviews; particularly given that, as Whitson (2020) notes, “what interns said didn’t always match what they did” (p. 17). Rather, we need to recognize the limits of our methods and the constraints imposed by the field itself in order to account for embodied, situated, and contextual practices, such as exhaustion and physical strain, emotional labor, unexpected accidents, and the ways in which developers negotiate their positions within the industry. While achieving this level of methodological sensitivity remains difficult, pursuing such approaches can provide crucial insights into the everyday functioning of the video game field and open up new analytical perspectives and possibilities for intervention.

Entering the field is not easy, but epistemic clarity helps

Epistemic clarity will facilitate the logistics of more "practical" work. Early identification of the zone or segment of the field will allow for greater precision in defining the identity of the researchers and, most importantly, the manner in which they establish contact. To illustrate this point, consider access to the zone of cultural mediation. In this case, the presentation of the project must emphasize the mediation aspect inherent to this space. This is in contrast to the production zone, where the central aspect is creation. This principle can be extrapolated to any given space represented in the cartography. For example, it is imperative to be mindful of the cultural particularities of geographical and temporal locations. The selection of a central concept—field, habitus, or capital(s)—will serve as a guide for choosing techniques. Finally, by challenging industry-related conceptions, insight can be gained into how participants name and signify their work.

Conclusions

Brendan Keogh (2023) concludes his book with a revealing statement: “The videogame industry doesn’t exist— at least not without an entire cultural field of videogame production to support it” (p. 218). The cartography proposed in this article (Figure 1) illustrates how the field of video game production is structured and sustained through various zones of mediation, education, distribution, consumption, and preservation. To adequately understand the experiences of the agents who inhabit each of these zones, it is necessary to move beyond a narrow understanding of the “industry” (Whitson, 2020).

Bourdieu saw his concepts as tools to be adapted to practice (Wacquant, 2018); just as we only use a hammer when the work requires it, the concepts of field, *habitus*, and capital(s) can only be used when our practice requires it. This is the case with Consalvo's gaming capital

(2007), Kirkpatrick's gaming field (2015), Keogh's video game (production) field (2023), crunch analysis (Cote and Harris, 2020), and the misogyny present in development (Foust, 2024; Johnson 2014) and consumption (Figuerola, 2024).

This article builds upon the work of these authors and proposes a framework that enables the construction of a cohesive theoretical and methodological image capable of moving beyond the notion of industry, which has been so prevalent in our area of study (Whitson, 2020). Our contribution centers on a critical analysis of the concepts of field, capital(s), and habitus. Regarding the concept of field, Keogh (2023) explicitly states that his formulation differs from that of Kirkpatrick (2015); each operates according to its own logics, positions, stances, and principles of domination that structure struggles within each subzone. Through Figure 1, we illustrate how these approaches, together with those of Kobayashi and Koyama (2020), Parker et al. (2018), and Olgado (2019), are mutually structured and sustained. With respect to gaming capital, our contribution lies in outlining a theoretical and methodological path that recognizes the different forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic, and emotional) deployed within a specific area. Drawing on this fieldwork-based analysis, we seek to develop a more precise conception of gaming capital or, if necessary, to propose new concepts that allow us to move beyond the reification of the term (Wacquant, 2018) and its use as an umbrella category. Finally, regarding habitus, our proposal focuses on identifying the ruptures, resistances, and alterities that emerge within the most common dispositions of a given subzone. Although certain habitus, such as crunch (Cote and Harris, 2020) and misogyny (Foust, 2024; Johnson, 2014), may be normalized, this does not imply that they are the only dispositions available.

Every step in researching the video games field requires constant epistemic reflection since no concept, whether theoretical or a way of naming one's work, is ever neutral. Every label

takes a position within the video game field. Therefore, we must be mindful of the cultural particularities of geographical and temporal contexts and recognize that selecting a central concept (field, habitus, or capital(s)) will influence the techniques employed in the analysis. Adopting this approach opens the door to acknowledge new spaces, people, and experiences. This mapping of the current state of the field can serve as an initial reference for future researchers seeking to explore new areas of the video game field, while accounting for the full diversity of actors, ideas, struggles, and forms of resistance present in each zone.

Although the epistemic reflection proposed in this mapping is a *modus operandi* that may allow the achievement of theoretical/methodological congruence, no approach is a panacea. It is necessary to recognize the limits of our theories and positions as researchers. In the case of Bourdieu, the limits of the French sociologist's approaches have become increasingly clear over the years, particularly in relation to queer, intersectional or peripheral experiences (Woodward, 2018). Within game studies, the main limitation comes from the fetishization of concepts, as we have explained, the notion of field is historical and therefore only allows us to study a particular model of organization and practice, the danger lies in the fact that history repeats itself and just as everything was once thought through the notion of industry, now everything is approached by inertia under the concepts of field, capital(s) and *habitus*, which would lead to a new theoretical/methodological blindness.

Finally, it's important to reflect on researchers' positioning in the field of video games. Bourdieu (1993) has already warned us that the only hope of producing scientific data lies in the explicit (ac)knowledge of our place in a field. As researchers, we believe (*illusio*) in the epistemic, social and economic value of video games, we see them as cultural artifacts worthy of distinction. Consequently, the fundamental question before us is where we stand in the field; we

intentionally leave video game studies unlocated in our proposal in Figure 1. We think that we inhabit a segment whose boundaries are spread between the academic field and the field of video games, but, in order to know the place that each of us occupies, it is necessary to leave the industry behind, to step outside in order to raise and outline the surface of the video game field, allowing us to see, hear, and accompany all those who consume, create, value, and play from their ways and meanings. Only by knowing the position of others can I know my own.

Notes

1. In accordance with confidentiality and anonymity agreements, all company and personal names are pseudonyms.
2. Given the spaces that Consalvo (2007) describes as part of the paratextual industry, we suggest translating this idea under the term "cultural mediation field," based on Parker et al.'s (2018) proposal. However, we propose to keep the idea of paratext as an object created by cultural mediators whose aim is to give (a) meaning to the act of playing video games.
3. For Bourdieu (1996), from "having" to "being", in other words, embodied cultural capital is transformed into *habitus*.

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