OUTLINES OF THE GAMER DATA SUBJECT POSITION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TRUST

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Introduction

Digital platforms increasingly gather and analyse extensive datasets to manage user experiences (Flew & Wilding, 2021). However, trust in these practices is not always given. Scholarship underlines concern over platform data practices, leading to what some describe as a 'culture of resignation' where users feel powerless to control their online lives (Draper & Turow, 2019). While scholarship on privacy issues in social media platforms is expanding (Rossotto et al., 2018), the context of online gaming privacy remains underexplored in comparison (Bourdoucen et al., 2023). This lack of attention is surprising and concerning - considering that market researchers suggest there are roughly 3 billion gamers worldwide (Newzoo, 2023).

Everyday socialities increasingly play out within and through the worlds of digital games (Flew & Humphreys, 2005; Hjorth & Richardson, 2020). However, gaming remains being studied as a specialized field outside the "mainstream media landscape" (Schwarzenegger et al., 2025). That occurs despite online gaming predating many of those "social media platforms" we today associate with ideas of online social interaction (Taylor, 2023). Likewise, data have been commonly utilized for a variety of purposes by gaming companies over the last decades (Kerr, 2017), mirroring similar developments of data-driven platform development and commercial operation that social media platforms have come to be known for (Burgess and Green, 2016).

Dedicating attention to online gaming and questions of trust is thus vital. For example, unlike social media sites like Facebook, online multiplayer games often necessitate installing anti-cheat technology that monitors players' systems during gameplay. While occasional controversies have surfaced regarding such data practices in gaming (Wilde, 2020), gamers generally seem accepting of these practices. This acceptance may stem from normalizing issues, like toxicity, within gaming culture, which adversely affects

gameplay experiences and motivates platforms actively to moderate experiences (ADL, 2023; Beres et al., 2021).

Research method

This paper approaches trust in gaming platforms as a facet of today's social media landscape. More specifically, we outline the data subject position of the gamer within the contemporary media landscape, looking at gamers not just as players but as a broader position of social media and internet users.

We draw on findings from a more extensive project investigating privacy, trust, and data literacy in online gaming. More specifically, we draw on a formative analysis of the data practices of 37 multiplayer online games (e.g., League of Legends), gaming distribution platforms (e.g., Steam), and online community sites (e.g., Discord). Through the privacy policies of these platforms, and adjacent case study analyses of controversies related to data practices, the paper studies the network structures in which the gamer data subject exists.

In the larger project, authors have previously analyzed the privacy policies of each case study and performed a thematic analysis, outlining common data practices. Where previous analysis focused on what platforms do, this re-analysis specifically focused on empirically outlining the data subject position that emerges from platform governance architectures, opening a conceptual orientation for future research on trust and user privacy in gaming, as well as cross-disciplinary debate.

Key findings

Building on our previous findings and looking at additional materials and examples (e.g., controversies related anti-cheat or matchmaking systems), we analyse significant modes of interaction and governance in the gaming context as follows:

- In relation to other gamers, the gaming data subject is an actor inside a data-driven and algorithmically mediated moral economy that sorts people into groups, moderates social interactions, and monitors devices used for gaming.

- In relation to creators of gaming content, the gaming data subject is a resource that creator's access by recording gameplay in semi-public gaming sessions, accessing player data through developer APIs, and relying on gamers as audiences of their creations.

- In relation to publishers, developers, and platform operators, the gamer data subject is an object of commodification, observed, targeted, and profited from through personal information, behavioral data traces, and attention as well as spending power associated within each subject position.

- In relation to advertisers, gaming platforms function as access points that link the gamer data subject position within broader advertising networks through

technologies such as tracking cookies and unique device identifiers.

- In relation to institutional actors, the data subject position of the gamer is linked to broader societal fields and institutional contexts, such as finance and banking, through the integration of payment services in the gaming landscape.

Discussion

By examining these relationships, the paper sheds light on how gamers and gaming are governed by the technological and policy architectures of platforms. In particular, we highlight three critical dimensions herein. Firstly, we examine forms of dependency through which gamers are bound to datafication processes to access online gaming spaces (Bernevega and Gekker, 2019). Secondly, we foreground how gaming platforms rely on behavioral profiling and algorithmic categorization, a form of "surveillance technicity" (Egliston 2020) to produce positive affective experiences and commercial desire. Lastly, we underline a systemic reliance on third-party actors such as advertisers, payment processors, and data brokers, linking the gaming data subject to more expansive societal fields "and transactional communities" (Swartz 2020).

Returning to Taylor (2023), the paper will emphasize that gaming has always been a core element of social media and that we can critically enhance our understanding of everyday data cultures (Burgess et al., 2022) by paying more attention to the data subject position of the gamer. Analytically, we will argue that outlining this subject position is crucial to better understand, in the end, matters of trust and data literacy in gaming – taking a relational view on trust herein, one in which people negotiate their position in relation to another and the vulnerabilities they expose themselves in that process (Baier, 1986; Scheman, 2020).Trust reflects, in other words, the messy and often contradictory terrain of commercial media landscapes that people navigate. As such, we hypothesize that by understanding the gamer data subject position and related trust systems and practices in detail, we can inquire better how people grapple with the increasing and intimate datafication of their everyday social lives (see also Kerr et al. 2014).

Conclusion

Ultimately, in this paper we thus call for greater transparency, meaningful consent mechanisms, and equitable governance practices in gaming. Our analysis reveals complex and opaque networks within which gamers have to position themselves in order to access what have become vital digital spaces of everyday leisure and sociality. We also outline the need for more attention to the gamer data subject position in relation to the variety of data collected from their behavior within their intimate sphere of everyday life. We thus see our analysis as making a next step contribution in unravelling these relations and opening doors for new research to produce more evidence that can help us inform better privacy policy regulation, data literacy initiatives, and measures of trust addressing the particularities of the gaming context – using the gamer data subject as a key nexus for systematic and comparative inquiry.

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