

# The play is the message. The everyday context of videogame play

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## INTRODUCTION

In November 2014 in France, the release of *Assassin's Creed Unity*, a videogame where the action takes place in Paris at the beginning of the 1789 French Revolution, has been followed by a public controversy. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of a left-wing party, had denounced the standpoint of the game, which he characterized as depicting that major political event from the point of view of those in power, and the overwhelming place given to their history rather than the history of the people. The importance of that controversy was not the novelty of the criticism – *ie* the well-known fact that videogames might convey dominant representations of the society – but the fact that it was supported by a major political figure, a candidate for the 2017 presidential election. Thus, the more videogames gain in cultural legitimacy, the more it becomes necessary to address the issue of their political and social content.

A large part of Video Game Studies have been dedicated to the analysis of ideology and social and spatial representations conveyed by videogames. Pioneer studies from Fuller and Jenkins (1995) and Frasca (2001) have laid the theoretical and methodological foundations for the analysis of a videogame content. Bogost enriched them with the notion of “procedural rhetoric” (2007). The issue of violence has been particularly addressed, whether to criticize the “militarized masculinity” (Kline, Dyer-Whiteford & De Peuter, 2003) conveyed by videogames or the way videogames were used to make apology of (American) warfare (Halter, 2006 ; Huntemann, Payne, 2010). More recently, in France, Mauco studied the social and political critique in *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2013).

But while much attention has been given to ideological messages in videogames by academics and public figures alike, we still lack ambitious empirical studies on the reception of videogames by the general audience. Do players actually decode (Hall, 1980)

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those messages to find the meaning analyzed by the ideological critiques? Does it actually matter to them? We argue that game studies should focus more on how videogame play is embedded in social forms, and that the meaning of play is built in relation with those forms.

To address these issues, we propose to discuss the results of a mixed method research on French videogames players. We carried out a phone survey about videogames on a sample of the French population aged 11 and more (n= 2 542) in 2012. The originality of this survey was that it targeted the whole population rather than the sole gamer population, allowing us to go beyond the traditional, unsatisfactory typology into hardcore, casual and non-players. It was supplemented by 30 in-depth interviews with players from a diversity of backgrounds. We also used data from representative surveys of cultural consumption in France (produced by the research department of the Ministry of Culture). In this paper, we mostly focus on the distribution of videogame genres use (what games are played), sociabilities (with whom they are played, engaged with and talked about) and daily life (in which contexts they are played).

First, for children and teenagers as well as adults, the most played videogames are Solitary, card games, browser games, and dance or music games, rather than those who come first in the top market sales, so that *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto* are pretty far in our survey. This shows that violent videogames and 18+ games (in the PEGI classification) make up but a small fraction of actual uses and that we should also focus on more casual games. Yet, public issues such as violence and addiction are often brought up by interviewees. While media debates do have an impact on the framing of videogames, actual uses are quite removed from ideological worries.

Second, the meaning of games lies in how it is shared with other people. This is clear for children and teenagers: almost everyone aged less than 18 in our sample had played videogames the year before, and more than two third were playing every week or more. At this age, games are a shared culture: they are a way to emancipate from parents' culture, and to bind to peers. On the adults side, videogames as well as board games play is very much linked to family configurations, but while boardgame use shows a soft decline with age, videogame use decreases even more strongly, so that people aged 40 and more currently play boardgames more often than videogames.

Finally, it is worth underlining the growing importance of videogame use during transportation even if domestic space still represents the main place for videogame practices. This shows the importance of "ordinary" practices, framed as much by taste as by material contingency of everyday life. What matters there for the players is whether they can mingle their videogame practice with the activities and rhythms of their daily routine.

It appears that the largest part of videogame players in France look for games not according to the message conveyed, or the social or political issues they can address, but according to their affordances, their ability to fit in the interstices of everyday life, to fulfill their function of pastime, leisure and socialization. This might be the main message of videogames.

## BIO

Hovig Ter Minassian is a lecturer in geography at the university of Tours (France) and member of the CITERES UMR 7324 Research Lab. His works are dedicated to the study of ordinary videogame practices, and ideology and spatial representations in videogames.

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