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VIDEOGAME SPECTATORSHIP AND ORBITAL FANDOM VALUE

RHYS GARETH JONES

PhD

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

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The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
School of Design

Videogame spectatorship and orbital fandom value

RHYS GARETH JONES

A thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Certificate of Originality

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X

Rhys Gareth Jones

Publications arising from the thesis

Refereed Journal Articles

Wirman, Hanna, and Rhys Jones. 2020. "Invading Space? On Perceived Risk and Doing Research in Game Arcades." *GAME – Games as Art, Media, Entertainment*, no. 9 (2020): 91-104.

Book Chapters

Wirman, Hanna, and Rhys Jones. 2019. "Let's Play Performance as Transgressive Play." In *Transgression in Games and Play*, edited by Kristine Jorgensen and Faltin Karlsen, 99-115. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Wirman, Hanna, and Rhys Jones. 2022. "Overwatch Fandom and the Range of Corporate Responses." In *Modes of Esport Engagement in Overwatch*, edited by Maria Ruotsalainen, Maria Törhönen, and Veli-Matti Karhulahti, 157-177. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jones, Rhys and Hanna Wirman. 2024. "Women's Esports in Hong Kong." In *The Chinese Video Game Industry*, edited by Feng Chen, Ken S. McAllister, and Judd Ethan Ruggill, 235-249. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Conference Presentations (Published)

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Wirman, Hanna, and Rhys Jones. 2019. "On the Local Value of Game Jam Games: Beyond Learning from the Process", Digital Game Association Conference 2019. Ritsumeikan University. Kyoto, Japan.

Wirman, Hanna, and Rhys Jones. 2020. "Block the Spawn Point": Play and Games in the Hong Kong 2019 Pro-democracy Protests", Digital Game Association Conference 2020.

Conference Presentations (Unpublished)

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Abstract

This thesis examines the layered and evolving nature of online videogame fandoms, with a particular focus on what it terms orbital fandom; fan communities that emerged one or more step removed from the original game text. Rather than engaging directly with the game itself, these fans form attachment through derivative content, content creators, and platform-mediated interactions. By shifting attention to these decentralised forms of engagement, the thesis expands existing models of fandom to account for the complex social, affective, and economic dynamics that shape participation in contemporary digital game cultures.

To explore these dynamics, the research draws on a mixed-methods approach combining virtual ethnography, semi-structured stakeholder interviews, and a participant journaling study. This methodology allows for both creator- and viewer-centred perspectives, capturing how value; cultural, social, and monetary is produced, circulated, and contested within platformed fan ecosystems. The thesis develops the Orbital Fandom Framework, a conceptual model that articulates how these forms of fandom operate within the wider infrastructures of platform governance and digital labour.

Empirical findings reveal how fan labour often takes place under informal, precarious, and frequently unacknowledged conditions. At the same time, fan contributions, particularly within orbital fandoms, play a vital role in shaping visibility, community cohesion, and even commercial success within the games industry. The thesis also explores the emotional intensities of parasocial relationships and the ethical concerns surrounding platform incentives and exploitation. These findings hold relevance not only for academic debates in game and fan studies but also for developers and platform designers seeking to engage with fan communities in more ethical and inclusive ways.

By introducing a new conceptual vocabulary, advancing a critical framework, and offering practical insights, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural and economic life of videogame fandoms in the platform era.

Keywords: Videogame; spectatorship; fandom; playbour; esports; livestreaming

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Glossary

Aca-fan	A portmanteau of “academic” and “fan,” referring to scholars who research subjects in which they are personally and emotionally invested as fans.
Algorithm	In the context of digital platforms (e.g., YouTube, Twitch), a proprietary computational system that determines content visibility and recommendation based on user data and engagement metrics.
Auto-ethnography	A qualitative research method in which the researcher uses self-reflection and personal experience to contextualise cultural phenomena, often within the communities they study.
Battle Pass	A monetisation system in videogames that allows players to unlock rewards by progressing through tiers, typically through gameplay or microtransactions.
Beta Testing	A pre-release phase in which a videogame is made available to selected users to identify bugs, provide feedback, and test server load under semi-public conditions.
Chat	A live textual communication system that allows viewers to interact with livestreamers and each other during a broadcast.
Clipper	Someone who selects and edits short segments from longform livestreams for redistribution, typically on platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, or TikTok.
Co-creation / Co-creativity	Collaborative processes wherein fans and developers both contribute to a game's content or cultural relevance, often blurring boundaries between producer and consumer.
Content Creator	An individual who produces and publishes media content for online platforms, including videos, livestreams, fan works, and commentary.
Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA)	A U.S. copyright law that regulates the use and removal of copyrighted content on digital platforms. Frequently used in gaming contexts to issue takedown notices against fan-made or critical content.
Discord	A communication platform popular with gaming communities, combining voice, video, and text chat in topic-based servers.
Downloadable Content (DLC)	Additional content for a videogame, released after the base game, which may include new levels, characters, or cosmetics
End-User License Agreement (EULA)	A legal contract between the user and the software provider that outlines permitted uses of a game or platform.

Esports	Organised, competitive videogaming at a professional level, often involving teams, sponsorships, and large-scale tournaments.
Esports Player	A professional gamer who competes in esports tournaments, often contracted by teams or organisations.
Fan Club/Fan Forum	Online or offline communities organised around shared admiration for a game, creator, or IP, often engaged in content sharing, discussion, and event coordination.
Fan Fiction/Fanfic	Fictional writing produced by fans that expands or reinterprets characters, settings, or events from a canonical source.
Fan-made/Fan-works	Creative outputs; including art, video, cosplay, and fiction produced by fans using existing media properties as inspiration.
Fair Use	A legal doctrine allowing limited use of copyrighted material without permission for purposes such as commentary, criticism, research, or parody
Gig Economy	An economic system characterised by short-term contracts and freelance work, often mediated by digital platforms; relevant in the context of fan monetisation (e.g., Ko-Fi, Patreon).
Hashtag	A metadata tag preceded by “#” used on social media and platforms like YouTube to categorise and aggregate content by topic.

Intellectual Property (IP)	Creations of the mind, such as games, characters, and settings, which are legally protected from unauthorised use.
In Real Life (IRL)	Used to distinguish online or virtual events from physical, offline experiences.
Kayfabe	A performance convention borrowed from professional wrestling, used in VTubing to describe the maintenance of a fictional persona as if it were real.
Let's Player	A content creator who records and shares gameplay sessions, typically including commentary, reactions, or humour.
Livestreamer (Streamer)	A person who broadcasts live content, typically gameplay, while interacting with an audience in real time.
Livestream Chat/Chatroom	The interface through which audiences interact with a livestreamer and each other, often a central component of community engagement.
Lootbox	A digital item containing randomised in-game rewards. Often controversial due to associations with gambling-like mechanics
Memes	Culturally resonant images, phrases, or video formats that are replicated and adapted across online platforms.

Modding/Mods	The practice of modifying a videogame by users, often to add or alter gameplay, graphics, or mechanics.
Monetisation	The process by which content creators earn revenue from their output, often through advertisements, subscriptions, donations, or platform-specific features.
Parasocial Relationship	A one-sided emotional relationship wherein a fan feels connected to a public figure or media personality who is unaware of their existence.
Parasocial-Andy	Slang used within livestreaming communities to describe fans perceived as overly emotionally invested in streamers, derived from early Twitch naming conventions.
Platform	A digital service or infrastructure (e.g., YouTube, Twitch, Discord) through which content is created, distributed, and monetised.
Playbour	A portmanteau of "play" and "labour," describing fan or user activity that blurs the lines between voluntary leisure and productive work
Reaction Video	A form of content in which a creator records their response to media, such as trailers, gameplay, or fan submissions.
Shadow Banning	A moderation technique where a user's content remains visible to them but is hidden from other users, often used to combat spam or misconduct.

Streaming Service	An online platform that facilitates real-time or on-demand distribution of digital content, including videogames, film, and music.
Subscription (YouTube/Twitch Context)	A feature that allows viewers to follow a content creator's uploads or livestreams. On some platforms, paid subscriptions grant additional benefits.
Superchat	A monetised YouTube feature allowing viewers to pay to have their messages highlighted during a livestream.
Takedown Notice	A formal request, typically under DMCA, to remove allegedly infringing content from a platform.
Terms of Service (ToS)	The legal agreement between a user and a platform outlining acceptable conduct and usage conditions.
Thumbnail (YouTube Context)	A preview image for a video, often custom-designed to attract viewer attention and increase click-through rates.
Top Donator	A viewer who has contributed the most in financial support during a livestream, often highlighted by the content creator.
Twitch	A livestreaming platform focused on videogame content and interactive streaming. Founded in 2011 as a spin-off from Justin.tv.
Twitch Affiliate/Partner	Designations awarded to streamers on Twitch who meet certain criteria, allowing them to monetise their

content via subscriptions, advertisements, and donations.

User-Generated Content (UGC)

Media created by users rather than official developers or publishers, encompassing a wide range of fan-produced works.

VTuber

A content creator who employs a virtual avatar to represent themselves, often using motion-capture technology and roleplaying techniques

Viral

Describes content that gains rapid popularity and circulation across platforms, often through sharing and algorithmic amplification

Watch Time Retention

A metric used by platforms such as YouTube to measure how long viewers watch a video. High retention rates often result in algorithmic promotion

Workshop Mode (Overwatch)

A game modification tool in Overwatch that allows players to create custom game modes and content using developer-provided scripting tools.

YouTube

A video-sharing platform founded in 2005, which serves as a major hub for Let's Plays, livestreams, fan animations, and other gaming-related content.

YouTuber

An individual who creates and distributes video content on YouTube, often specialising in entertainment, commentary, or gaming.

YouTube Algorithm

The proprietary system that determines video recommendations, rankings, and visibility on the YouTube platform.

YouTube Membership/Join	A monetisation feature on YouTube that allows fans to pay for access to exclusive content and perks from a creator.
YouTube Subscriptions	A free feature allowing users to follow creators and receive updates when new videos are uploaded

Chapter 1.

Introduction

1.1. Motivations

The motivation for this thesis lies in both personal experience and academic engagement. I have been a videogame fan for as long as I can remember. According to my mother, when I had trouble sleeping as a baby, she would rock my cradle while playing videogames, something that apparently soothed me. From the moment I could hold a controller, I was playing games, with my earliest memory being Sonic the Hedgehog on my parents' Sega Mega Drive. Yet from an early age I was not only interested in playing videogames but also in watching others play. If I visited a friend's home, I was often content to watch them play rather than taking the controller myself. On one occasion, when I was seven, a friend's parent asked, "Why aren't you letting Rhys play?" to which I replied, "No, I wanted to watch him play this game." That moment stayed with me. Why did I enjoy watching so much? Was it the game itself, the person playing, or some combination of both?

As I grew older and the internet advanced, I began watching videogame content on YouTube and discovered that I was far from alone in this interest. I became fascinated by the rise of content creators who built audiences by sharing gameplay. I experimented briefly with content creation myself, uploading Let's Play videos of LittleBigPlanet levels I had designed in 2009. Most of these videos attracted only a handful of views, but one surpassed several hundred after it was curated into an official LittleBigPlanet playlist by the developer of the game. Between 2013 and 2014 I also experimented with livestreaming, primarily broadcasting horror games and new releases on the PlayStation 4. My streams on the platform Ustream typically drew around 10-20 viewers, with a peak of 100 during the launch day of Watchdogs. While this gave me insight into the practical demands of content creation, I ultimately found greater satisfaction in watching others, and I became increasingly intrigued by the scale and dynamics of the fandoms that surrounded these creators.

My most formative experience as a videogame fan came through the LittleBigPlanet community in my late teens. The game's level creation and sharing functions fostered a creative and collaborative environment. I became active on the official forums, sharing levels during beta tests and entering competitions. At a London gaming convention I attended a community meetup, where I met several community managers. When I introduced myself by my forum username, one replied, "Oh that's you! We were playing your levels in the office recently because they're so funny." It was the first time I realised how permeable the boundary between player and developer could be, and how fan contributions might influence a game's development.

My interest in this topic has also been shaped by observing the changing forms of fan participation over time. I witnessed the rise and fall of machinima on YouTube, from its early days as a dominant form of videogame fan content to its current existence as a niche practice maintained by passionate hobbyists. The shift from labour-intensive cinematic productions to the more accessible format of Let's Plays reflected broader changes in platform algorithms. YouTube's prioritisation of frequent uploads and viewer retention during the 2010s had a profound effect on the types of content promoted and monetised, reshaping the creative possibilities for fans.

A decisive turning point in my thinking came when I encountered the concept of parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956): one-sided relationships in which an individual invests energy and emotion in a figure who is unaware of their existence. This dynamic resonated deeply with my observations of videogame spectatorship fandoms and fuelled my desire to study them more systematically. As content creators gained influence, videogame companies did not always recognise the importance of these creators' fandoms. My dual perspective: immersed in this culture while also familiar with game development practices, positions me to examine how these ecosystems are interrelated.

This research is also informed by my position as both a participant within and observer of videogame fan communities. This dual role provides valuable insight into the practices, norms, and dynamics of orbital fandom, while also requiring careful reflexive awareness in the interpretation of data. Rather than treating this position as a limitation, I adopt it as a methodological strength, enabling a more situated and nuanced

understanding of fan practices. A more detailed reflection on this positionality is provided in the methodology chapter.

When I began exploring videogame spectatorship academically, I was struck by how little sustained research had been done on these fandoms. While scholars such as Witkowski (2009, 2012, 2018) and Taylor (2018) have made significant contributions to the study of esports and livestreaming, existing literature tends to focus on singular formats of videogame spectatorship. There is a relative lack of comparative or integrative research that examines how different forms of spectatorship relate to one another. My earlier collaborations also highlighted the value of specific practices within these cultures. With Wirman, I examined how Let's Players shaped the reception of avatar voices (Wirman & Jones, 2017), the cultural significance of female esports players (Jones & Wirman, 2024), and transgressive player-made content in the Sims community (Wirman & Jones, 2019). I have also explored the implications of fan culture loss following the deletion of the Machinima YouTube channel (Jones, 2019), as well as the representation of Hong Kong in videogames (Wirman & Jones, 2019; Jones, 2019; Wirman & Jones, 2020; Wirman & Jones, 2021). Further, my work with Wirman (2022) developed a framework for analysing corporate responses to fandom, which provides a foundation for this thesis. Alongside this, I have published research on human–computer interaction and sexuality (Hua et al., 2022), which, while outside the immediate field of game studies, strengthened my engagement with methodological and ethical questions of digital participation.

Taken together, these experiences; personal, creative, and academic, form the foundation for the current project. This thesis provides the opportunity for a broader and more integrative investigation, one that examines multiple forms of videogame spectatorship together, considers how they interconnect, and develops an original framework for understanding the value flows that define orbital fandom.

1.2. Background

This thesis builds upon my own research in addition to a framework previously developed in collaboration with Hanna Wirman, published in the chapter Overwatch

Fandom and the Range of Corporate Responses (Wirman & Jones, 2022). The work emerged from sustained empirical and theoretical engagement with Blizzard Entertainment's management of Overwatch fan practices and serve as a foundational lens for interrogating the corporate structuring of digital fandoms. It posits that fan engagement, rather than being simply expressive or oppositional, exists within a spectrum of corporate strategies that range from facilitation to suppression. This analytical model proposed in that study continues to inform this thesis's examination of fan participation and labour within the broader condition of platform capitalism.

This framework developed in that earlier study advanced a taxonomy of corporate response to fan labour, identifying a range of practices that reflect differing degree of support, tolerance, resistance. Supportive modes included the provision of development tools, such as the Overwatch Workshop, official endorsement through retweets or community engagement initiatives, and the selective incorporation of fan creations into canonical game features. These facilitative strategies, however, coexisted with mechanisms of containment and disavowal. Examples include public distancing from sexually explicit fan works and, where deemed necessary, legal action aimed at protecting brand identity and intellectual property. This stratified model reveals that corporations rarely adopt a singular, unified approach to fandom. Rather, they operate through but flexible, context-specific governance strategies that respond variable to different forms of fan engagement.

Moreover, the framework contributes to a more granular understanding of digital labour within fan communities. It demonstrates that fan labour is not only unpaid but often conditional upon its alignment with brand-friendly discourse, platform standards, and corporate risk management. Blizzard's differentiated responses revealed how corporate actors are capable of rewarding forms of fandom that extend the game's market reach, while simultaneously excluding or disciplining those deemed disruptive or off-brand. This dynamic complicates binary distinctions between co-optation and resistance, instead locating fandom within a shifting terrain of strategic accommodation, instrumentalization, and exclusion.

Finally, the framework clarified that game developers, while not platforms in the infrastructural sense, nonetheless increasingly function as platform-like actors in their ability to shape visibility, participation, and monetisation. Developers do not merely

create games; they administer and curate the ecosystems in which games are experienced, interpreted, and circulated. This insight is central to the theoretical argument of this thesis, which positions developers alongside platforms such as YouTube and Twitch as co-governors of participatory culture. Both operate within the same political economy of attention and labour, and both are implicated in the extraction of value from fan engagement.

Positioning the framework as a point of departure, this thesis builds upon, rather than simply revisits, earlier findings to construct a more expansive analysis of the relational ecologies between fans, platforms, developers, and content creators. The Overwatch study serves as both a methodological and theoretical prototype, informing the core objective of this thesis: to trace how digital fandoms are shaped, constrained, and valorised within a system of increasingly integrated corporate governance. The framework is further developed here through its integration into a broader theorisation of *orbital fandoms* and the political economy of digital media. The concept of orbital fandom builds on the insight that fan labour is not merely reactive or resistant but actively shaped by structures of invitation and exclusion instituted by game developers. In doing so, this thesis foregrounds the ambivalent position of fans and content creators, whose practices are both enabled and delimited by corporate-defined boundaries, extending the insights from the Overwatch study to interrogate the wider dynamics of value creation and circulation within platform-mediated fan cultures.

1.3. Research Objectives and Questions

Situating within the evolving relationship of videogame culture, content creation, and digital fandom, this thesis is guided by the following objectives:

- To explore the relationships between videogame developers, content creators, and fan communities, with particular emphasis on what is herein defined as orbital fandoms.
- To foreground the importance of orbital fandoms within this landscape and to encourage more inclusive and reciprocal models of engagement between the industry and its fan communities
- To see the various forms in which value is generated by fan communities and content creators, as well as the ways in which these values circulate and are acknowledged, if at all, by developers and platform stakeholders.

In pursuit of these objectives, the thesis is structured around one primary research question:

What is the relationship between videogame developers or publishers and value creation within orbital fandoms?

This central question is supported by the following sub-questions, which are intended to guide a critical inquiry into the social, cultural, and economic dynamics of fan activity in digital game cultures:

- a) What constitutes the value creation of orbital fandom?
- b) What are the effects of orbital fandom value flow on their respective fan communities?
- c) How can a theoretical framework of this relationship assist videogame designers, developers, and publishers in recognising and supporting fan contributions in order to strengthen fan–developer relationships?

1.4. Thesis Structure

This thesis consists of eight chapters, each building upon the last to develop a critical understanding of *orbital fandom* and the socio-cultural, economic, and ethical dynamics that shape contemporary videogame fan practices.

Chapter 2: Foundations and Frameworks: Fan Engagement, Spectatorship, and Platformed Value reviews key literature across game studies, fan studies, digital labour, and platform governance, focusing on how each field has addressed fan participation, value creation, and spectatorship. It distinguishes between active and productive fans, explores practices such as livestreaming and VTubing, and examines parasocial relationships, playbour, and platform governance. The chapter concludes by identifying gaps in existing research, particularly regarding fandoms that emerge through mediated and derivative content, which inform the development of orbital fandom in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Defining Orbital Fandom introduces the concept of *orbital fandom* to describe forms of fan engagement that occur at one or more degrees of separation from the original videogame text. These fandoms emerge through interactions with

derivative content, fan creators, or platform-based communities rather than direct engagement with the game itself. The chapter develops a framework for understanding these decentralised and layered practices, arguing that they generate distinct fan cultures and forms of value often overlooked by traditional models of fandom.

Chapter 4: Methodology and Research This chapter outlines the methodological framework adopted for this thesis. The research investigates the practices, values, and experiences of videogame fandom through the lens of orbital fandom, a conceptual framework that emphasises the circulation of value, recognition, and creative labour across fans, creators, and industry stakeholders. To capture these dynamics, the study employs a qualitative, multi-method design combining participant journaling, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis. This approach prioritises depth, context, and reflexivity, enabling an exploration of both everyday media practices and the broader structural conditions of digital fandom.

Chapter 5: Stakeholder Perspectives: Creative Labour, Recognition, and Community This chapter presents a thematic analysis of interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders, including cosplayers, content creators, developers, and community organisers. The aim is not to treat each interview as a self-contained case study, but to trace the recurring patterns and tensions that emerge across participants' accounts. This comparative lens reveals how individuals situated in different positions within the fandom ecosystem; whether as amateur creators, professionalised performers, or industry affiliates, navigate overlapping concerns about recognition, labour, identity, and sustainability.

Chapter 6: Everyday Engagements: Media Consumption and the Rhythms of Fan Life: his chapter presents findings from a journaling study that explored the everyday media consumption habits of fans engaging with videogame-related content. Whereas Chapter 5 centred on stakeholder perspectives, this chapter adopts a viewer-centred approach, foregrounding the routines, motivations, and affective experiences that structure fan engagement on a day-to-day basis. By shifting focus from production to consumption, the analysis highlights how fandom is lived and sustained in ordinary contexts, often through seemingly mundane practices that nonetheless accumulate significance.

Chapter 7: Synthesising the Field: Value, Visibility, and the Structure of Orbital Fandoms: brings together the findings from the stakeholder interviews and journaling study to develop a critical discussion of *orbital fandom* within the broader theoretical framework of the thesis. It explores how value is produced and circulated through platformed fan practices, highlighting the interplay between individual experiences, community dynamics, and algorithmic systems. The chapter also refines the orbital fandom model by examining its socio-cultural, affective, and economic dimensions, setting the stage for the thesis conclusion.

Chapter 8: Conclusion: Contributions, Ethical Reflections, and Future Directions concludes the thesis by synthesising its key contributions to the study of videogame fandoms. It formalises the concept of *orbital fandom* and advances a critical framework for understanding fan labour, value creation, and parasocial dynamics within platformed fan cultures. The chapter also reflects on the ethical and practical implications of these findings for both academic and industry contexts, proposing future directions for research and highlighting the need for more sustainable and equitable models of fan–developer engagement.

1.5. Contributions

This thesis offers several original contributions to the fields of game studies, fan studies, digital labour theory, and platform analysis. At its core, it introduces the concept of *orbital fandom* devised to account for the decentralised, layered, and often indirect modes through which fan engage with videogame culture today. Departing from conventional models that situate fandom in immediate relation to an intellectual property, orbital fandom attends to practices that emerge at one or more degrees of separation from the original text. This includes fandoms that coalesce around Let's Players, livestreamers, VTubers, and remix creators, whose audiences frequently form attachments to not the games themselves, but to the derivative content they inspire. In articulating this concept, this thesis provides a more nuanced vocabulary for describing contemporary participatory cultures shaped by platform infrastructures and the proliferation of content.

Building upon this conceptual groundwork, the thesis develops a comprehensive *Orbital Fandom Framework* that maps the generation, circulation, and recognition of value within digital fan ecosystems. This framework distinguishes between three interrelated value forms; cultural, social, and monetary and considers how each is produced and exchanged among fans, creators, and developers. In doing so, it draws attention to the uneven flows of value and the frequently precarious conditions under which fan labour operates. This framework thus moves beyond celebratory accounts of participatory culture, offering a more critical lens through which to examine how fan practices are increasingly shaped by platform governance, corporate recognition strategies, and the logics of digital capitalism.

While this thesis is not primarily a videogame design study, it has implications for design practice in a broader sense. By showing how value is generated through spectatorship, creator communities, and fan labour beyond direct gameplay, the thesis suggests that more inclusive game design should account not only for players, but also for the wider participatory ecosystems that surround games. This includes considering how developers support, recognise, and ethically engage with fan and creator practices that extend the life of a game beyond the text itself.

The thesis further contributes empirically grounded insights into the lived experiences of a diverse range of stakeholders, including fan creators, journalists, content moderators, game developers, and fan audiences. Drawing upon semi-structured interviews and participating journaling, the study illuminates the emotional, social, and creative dimensions of fandom as they are navigated from various positions within the broader fan ecosystem. This methodological approach enables a more holistic understanding of the affective labour, community dynamics, and boundary management practices that define fan participation under platform capitalism.

In addition, the thesis extends and refines digital labour theory (Terranova, 2000; Kücklich, 2005; Postigo, 2007, 2016) by demonstrating how platformed fandoms operate simultaneously as sites of voluntary expression and economic exploitation. Concepts such as *playbour* and *zones of entanglement* are employed to analyse how fan labour becomes interwoven with developer interests and platform incentives. Through this lens, the thesis contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to interrogate the asymmetrical power

relations between media industries and their audiences, while also attending to the agency, creativity, and resilience exhibited by fans working within these constraints.

Finally, this study offers a critical analysis of platform governance and corporate recognition practices, shedding light on how fan labour is legitimised, co-opted, or marginalised in relation to concerns such as brand safety, marketability, and algorithmic visibility. Individual cases, including the commodification of VTuber fanbases and high-profile livestreaming contracts underscore the commercial stakes of fan participation and the strategic positioning of creators as monetisable assets in platform competition.

In synthesising conceptual and analytic innovation, empirical insight, and critical theory, this thesis offers a generative lens through which to rethink the entangled culture, affective, and economic dimension of contemporary videogame fandom.

Chapter 2.

Foundations and Frameworks: Fan Engagement, Spectatorship, and Platformed Value

2.1. Introduction

This chapter reviews the key bodies of literature that inform the conceptual and analytical foundation of this thesis. It maps out current debates and frameworks across game studies, fan studies, digital labour, and platform governance, with particular attention to how each has approached fan engagement, value creation, and spectatorship in digital game cultures. The chapter begins with an overview of scholarship in game and fandom studies, focusing on how scholars have conceptualised players and fans as participatory and productive actors. It introduces the distinction between *active* and *productive* fans, highlighting the importance of these categories in understanding contemporary videogame cultures. This is followed by a review of videogame spectatorship, which traces a range of fan practices centred around the act of watching others play, including *Let's Plays*, livestreaming, esports, and VTubing, alongside the broader social dynamics of content creation. The third section introduces the concept of *parasocial relationships*, exploring how fan affect, and emotional labour underpin engagement in content creator fandoms. This is followed by a discussion of *digital labour* and *playbour*, which examine how fan practices contribute economic, social, and cultural value, often under conditions of informality, invisibility, and corporate capture. Building on this, the final section considers the legal frameworks; particularly U.S. copyright law, fair use, and the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) that shape the boundaries of fan labour and content circulation. Here, the chapter examines how copyright regulation, often enforced through automated systems, impacts creators operating within fandom spaces, at times enabling suppression of critique and exacerbating platform power. These bodies of work offer important insights but leave certain aspects under-theorised; particularly the forms of fandom that emerge not from direct engagement with a game, but from mediated and derivative content. This chapter

concludes by identifying these gaps, which serve as the departure point for the development of *orbital fandom* in the next chapter.

2.2. Game and Fandom Studies

This research is situated at the intersection of game studies and fandom studies. In their article “Game Analysis: Developing a Methodological Toolkit for the Qualitative Study of Games” (2006), Consalvo and Dutton identify two dominant strands within empirical game studies one that focuses on analysing the game audience (e.g., players) and another that critiques or interprets the games themselves. The latter approach, according to Fernández-Vara (2014), include examining games in relation to their socio-economic context, control mechanisms, and representation.

Espen Aarseth’s influential essay “Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis” (2003) outlines three potential approaches for analysing games. First, researchers can scrutinise the game’s design, rules, and mechanics, including interactions with the developers. Second, they can observe others playing the game, read their reports and reviews, and hope to gain representative and competent insights. Third, researchers can immerse themselves in playing the game. Aarseth contends that the third approach, involving the researcher actively engaging with the game, is the most crucial aspect of games research. He even draws parallels with academic research in other performing arts, where training often encompasses practical performance skills. This highlights the notion of auto-ethnographic research, where the researcher becomes a participant in their own research. Aarseth doesn't dismiss the other two approaches but points out that researchers playing the game themselves should be the initial and fundamental step before considering the other methods.

However, much of this work centres on analysing the game, offering limited insights into players and audiences. This is where fandom studies become particularly relevant. Fan studies, by contrast, focuses more explicitly on the fan communities, including their affective investments and the intertextual relationships among fans. As Evans and Stasi elucidate, “Fan studies come out of a rich tradition of methodological discussion situated at the intersections of media and cultural studies, with its concerns about the audience, the production of media texts, and the way texts, identities, and industries interact.” (2014, p.8). In the context of game fandom studies Morris (2003)

developed an evolution from “participatory media” to “co-creative media”. John Banks (2013) expanded the concept of “co-creativity” in videogames, proposing that games have transformed into shared creations, collaboratively shaped by game developers and players. These shifts in production and authorship laid the ground for understanding fan-developer dynamics as a form of collaborative cultural production.

Within fandom studies, this research primarily engages with the notions of *productive fans* and *active fans*. While the former refers to fans who produce and contribute, through practices such as content creation, modding, or fan art, the latter refers to those who engage with their fandom through more passive or lightweight forms of interaction, such as watching content, leaving “like” on a YouTube video, or posting a brief comment. The concept of productive fandom was articulated by Wirman (2009) in her article “On productivity and game fandom.” Wirman challenges the assumption that games are solely sites of leisure, arguing instead that games and play, in fact, inherently involve forms of productivity. She proposes five dimensions of player productivity: game play as productivity; productivity for play (instrumental); productivity beyond play (expressive); games as tools; and productivity as a part of game play. This framework draws a clear distinction between productive fans and the broader notion of participatory cultures; featuring low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creation and sharing, and informal mentorship, as proposed by Henry Jenkins (1992; 2006). While Jenkins contends that fans are not merely consumers of media but active participants in its production, circulation, and interpretation, Wirman cautions against assuming that all fandoms are inherently productive. The notion of *active fans* has undergone a transformation in the digital age, as the internet has radically reshaped how fans interact and participate in fandom. Rather than relying on traditional markers of active engagement, many fans now engage in dispersed, fluid, and networked ways. Online communities serve as key aspects where fans connect, and discuss their admiration for creators, including videogame content creators. Interestingly, many participants in these online communities may not identify as active fans in the conventional sense. Yet their behaviours, such as seeking out like-minded individuals, contributing to discussions, or sharing fan-made creative work, indicates a broader, more nuanced form of participations. This shift reflects a changing landscape in which the boundaries between active and passive fandom are increasingly blurred.

While the concepts of productive and active fans are well established within fan studies, I encountered a particular challenge when seeking frameworks through which to study them. Existing models often place emphasis on fans of things; that is, they centre a specific media object, such as a game, film, or television show, as the primary focus of fan engagement. However, such frameworks often overlook contexts like videogame spectatorship, where fans may not necessarily be fans of the game itself. Instead, their engagement may revolve around the content creator, the style of commentary, or the community that forms around the act of viewing. In other words, these individuals can be understood as *fans of fans*; whose attachments are oriented less towards the original game and more towards those who play, interpret, or perform it for an audience. In the next section, I examine the concept of videogame spectatorship in more detail, exploring its various forms and modes of engagement.

While the theories reviewed in this section provide valuable frameworks for understanding fan participation and game cultures, they often centre on direct engagement with media texts or on fans as consumers and co-creators of primary content. For the purposes of this thesis, I draw particularly on Jenkins' (1992, 2006) concept of participatory culture, Wirman's (2009) distinction between productive and active fans, and Sotamaa's (2007) exploration of transformative play. However, I find that existing models tend to under-theorise the layered engagements that occur when fans form attachments to other fans or content creators. Consequently, this thesis builds upon these foundations to develop a new conceptual framework; *orbital fandom*, that better captures the decentralised, mediated, and often platform-dependent nature of contemporary videogame fandoms.

2.3. Videogame Spectatorship

Videogame spectatorship is the act of their actively or passively watching videogames from the perspective of turn-taking players, active watchers or 'just watchers' (Orme 2021). Even before the internet allowed for online audiences to spectate games, physical crowds of onlookers could cause frame shifts in public gaming spaces such as arcades (Lin & Sun 2011). The mere presence of an audience has a marked effect on the performance of a player (Kimble & Rezabex 1992), indicating an intrinsic connection between the two. Videogame Spectatorship as is used here refers to the act of a person

watching another person play a videogame. While today most videogame spectatorship takes place via online video sharing platforms, such as YouTube or Twitch.tv, there is a long history of videogame spectatorship going back to the advent of videogames (Ditmarsch 2013). Videogame arcade owners noticed that while people were not playing, they would often stop to watch other players within the arcade play, even leading arcade cabinet manufacturers developing second screens which sat on top of the cabinet itself allowing more people to spectate one cabinet when in use. Even historically there is a link between videogames and spectatorship. As mentioned before, videogame spectatorship today takes place mostly online and can broadly be broken down into three categories; Let's Plays, Livestreaming, and esports, which is not to say there are no other types, but these are the three biggest and most popular forms of videogame spectatorship on the internet today.

Overall, the important thing to note about these three groups is that they are “content creators;” that is, they create content using another companies’ intellectual property on their platforms, games or otherwise. This is the main distinction to wrap our head around with esports and regular sports, esports players are making money from a videogame which is owned by a game developer, but no one owns the intellectual property of Football for example. Therefore, esports players are beholden to the rules and expectations of the game developer which is a corporation rather than a sporting institute or body that may have different expectations for the players. This intellectual property distinction is what separates esports from regular sports as a spectatorship sport. The European Court ruled in the Murphy Case (joined cases C-403/08 and C-429/08 Football Association Premier League v QC Leisure and Karen Murphy v Media Protection Services Limited, 2011) that

“sports events such as football matches cannot be considered intellectual creations or works and so cannot be protected by copyright.”

Fans of an sport may create fan-art of their favourite player in the style of the character in the game they play. A football fan This body of work highlights that platforms are not neutral intermediaries but active infrastructures that shape the conditions of participation. For fan and creator communities, this means visibility is rarely a direct outcome of effort or quality; instead, it is contingent on opaque algorithmic systems and moderation regimes. As a result, the circulation of fan labour is often

unstable, privileging content that aligns with platform logics of engagement while marginalising slower, niche, or craft-based practices. This theoretical perspective provides a foundation for considering how such structural dynamics intersect with the affective and creative investments that characterise orbital fandoms.).”

2.3.1. Let's Plays

Let's Plays are edited videos of a person; a Let's Player, playing a videogame with a commentary over the top. They typically have a web-cam video of the player to capture their reaction while the game is being played as well but sometimes it is only an audio voice-over. They can vary from highly to minimally edited, but the main point is that they are pre-recorded videos that are published at a later date. They can be any time in length but are usually at least around 10 minutes long. Let's Plays are thought to have originated in 2005 in the online forum SomethingAwful where users would share their gameplay experiences, with the first ever Let's Play as we know today being attributed to the user SlowBeef. With the advent of video-sharing platforms and specifically YouTube in 2005, Let's Plays blew up and began to dominate these platforms. To this day, Let's Plays, and videogame related videos are still very popular on YouTube. Let's Players on YouTube attract vast audiences, with the platform's most prominent figure, PewDiePie, currently boasting over 110 million subscribers. Many of his gaming videos receive millions of views, reflecting the widespread appeal of this form of content. Subscribing to a user on YouTube is free and allows users to receive notifications whenever the channel releases new content. Let's Players do not necessarily have to be skilled at the games they are playing; both novices and experts alike can find success while playing the same game (Wirman & Jones, 2019). Let's Players are often performative in nature (Wirman & Jones, 2017b) putting on a persona in order to entertain their audience based on their personality alone.

Incorporating Let's Plays in the research is crucial because it represents a fundamental aspect of game spectatorship and fan engagement in the digital age. Let's Plays have become a pervasive form of content creation and spectatorship within the gaming community, offering valuable insights into the diverse ways fans interact with videogame content. By examining Let's Plays, the research can explore how players turn into content creators, bridging the gap between gaming and entertainment. Let's Plays

also exemplify the transformation of fan culture, where fans become producers, and how this transition influences the relationships between fans, game developers, and other players. Additionally, this inclusion allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted nature of game-related content and fan participation, extending beyond traditional models of game engagement to include participatory forms of entertainment, commentary, and critique.

2.3.2. Livestreaming

Livestreaming, as a digital practice, entails the real-time transmission of video content over the internet, allowing audiences to observe and interact with the 'streamer' (Kaytoue et al., 2012). Videogame livestreamers typically engage in extended streaming sessions, often spanning multiple hours, and maintain real-time interactions with their viewers through chat functions available on various streaming platforms.

The main platforms I engage with within this thesis are YouTube and Twitch, the leading video distribution and livestreaming platforms in English speaking player communities. Their large user bases generate massive volumes of content, interactions, and economic activity, making them rich sites for observing patterns in digital fan culture. As such, they provide access to the most visible and influential instances of fan participation and content production, which are often referenced or emulated across smaller or niche platforms. That is not to say there aren't other extremely large video sharing platforms such as Vimeo or Bilibili, these are just the ones I am most familiar with and am able to have contact with. Twitch.tv currently stands as the preeminent livestreaming platform, where, despite the diversity of content, videogame livestreams constitute the predominant category among its streamers. Viewers of these Twitch.tv livestreams have the option to "follow" a streamer at no cost, which provides them with notifications when the streamer initiates a live broadcast. Additionally, viewers may elect to "subscribe" to a streamer for a fee of US\$4.99, thereby offering financial support to streamers of their preference. Twitch also allows creators to make more expensive monthly memberships through a three-tier system, with higher tiered supporters may get additional benefits. YouTube also serves as a popular platform for livestreaming, alongside its more established role in hosting pre-recorded video content. Viewers have the option to "Subscribe" to a channel for free which notifies them of a streamer's

broadcasts, and “Join” for USD4.99 per month to become a “Member” to monetarily support the creators. Furthermore, viewers retain the capacity to provide direct monetary donations to streamers as an overt gesture of support, often accompanied by the streamer reading aloud the viewer's accompanying message (Recktenwald, 2016; Johnson & Woodcock, 2019). While the names of the functions are different, we can see a generalised normalisation of monetary support systems across streaming platforms. Livestreaming platforms like Twitch have not only transformed how games are watched but have also contributed to the cultural and economic significance of gaming. Livestreams foster a strong sense of community and interactivity, with viewers actively engaging through chats, donations, and even fan content creation. With game developers even implementing Twitch integrated mechanics to games which allow viewers to directly interact with a game as a livestreamer is playing it. These platforms have introduced new economic and business models within the gaming industry, which are vital to understand.

Livestreamers exhibit a broad spectrum of content strategies, ranging from specialisation in a single game to engaging with multiple titles as “variety streamers.” Importantly, prowess in gameplay is not an indispensable prerequisite for success, as many livestreamers amass substantial followings predicated primarily upon the appeal of their personalities, thereby transforming livestreaming into a sustainable full-time occupation (Taylor, 2018).

A distinctive feature of livestreaming lies in its ability to blur the boundaries between passive and active engagement (Smith et al., 2013). While the act of playing a videogame inherently constitutes an active undertaking, the act of watching someone else play imbues it with a passive quality. However, the interactivity afforded by livestreaming propagates a novel dynamic in which viewers actively engage with the streamer, thereby challenging the conventional categorisation of audiences as solely passive observers. Livestreaming serves as one of the primary mediums for fan engagement and fan-developed content, making it an integral part of value creation and circulation in the gaming ecosystem.

2.3.3. Esports

Esports, denoting the competitive engagement in videogame play, encompasses highly skilled elite gamers who engage in formalised tournaments and matches, akin to the structures observed in traditional sports (Hamari & Sjöblom 2017). Wirman, H., & Jones, R. (2022). *Women's Esports in Hong Kong*. The publication *Women's Esports in Hong Kong* is thematically adjacent to this thesis. While it does not form a direct part of the empirical studies presented here, it shares methodological concerns around access and ethics, and conceptually laid groundwork for understanding the gendered dynamics of participation in digital gaming cultures. Competitive videogame tournaments have a historical precedent, with the inaugural videogame tournament taking place at Stanford University shortly after the creation of *SpaceWar!*; a space combat videogame and one of the earliest known examples of the medium, developed in 1962. Moreover, early instances of televised videogame competitions, such as the 1982 TV Gameshow *Starcade*, where participants competed against each other on arcade machines, reflect the emergent stages of competitive gaming. In its early iterations, these tournaments primarily aimed to entertain and provide amusement rather than serve as a rigorous assessment of skill and expertise.

The formalised landscape of modern esports tournaments, as we conceive them today, can be traced back to the 1990s. This transformation was spurred by the advent of the internet and the rise of Local Area Network (LAN) parties, enabling large numbers of players to participate simultaneously. Notably, South Korea emerged as a stronghold for esports, with games like *StarCraft* gaining immense popularity to the extent that it is regarded as the “national pastime”.

Contemporary esports have evolved to mirror the standardised structures and frameworks of traditional global sporting leagues. Organisations now possess teams competing across various games, and players are often scouted and trained from an early age to cultivate their talents and maximise their potential (Witkowski, 2012). Esports teams compete for substantial cash prizes in annual tournaments. A notable example is the 2021 International tournament for the game *Dota 2*, a multiplayer online action game, which featured a remarkable prize pool of US\$40 million. An intriguing facet of this particular prize pool is that a significant portion of it was contributed by fans of the game. Enthusiasts had the opportunity to purchase battle passes for between

US\$4.99 and US\$44.99 in the lead-up to the international esports event, with the proceeds contributing to the prize pool (Mortimer, 2020). This phenomenon highlights the influential role played by fans in shaping the esports landscape, exemplifying their capacity to elevate prize pools to unprecedented levels.

Viewers and enthusiasts of esports can partake in the spectacle by watching these grand tournaments online through livestreaming platforms. Furthermore, they have the option to attend these events in person, hosted in expansive stadiums. My personal involvement in the organising and facilitating esports tournaments at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University School of Design on multiple occasions has afforded me a unique vantage point has enabled me to bridge the gap between academia and industry, facilitating interactions not only with industry professionals but also with scholars possessing distinctive insights into the esports culture. In helping to organise the Queen's Cup (女王盃) an all-women esports competition where the players were hidden away from the audience. The gender differences between gender segregated esports are very important within the current esports culture.

Tobias Scholz and Volker Stein (2019) present a distinctive perspective on the economic dynamics of the esports sector with their discussion on "The Business Model Network of eSports: The Case of Overwatch." Their approach involved the creation of a network model specifically tailored to the esports business. Scholz and Stein argued that the esports ecosystem surrounding the game Overwatch was not inherently self-sustaining, with its rapid exponential growth leading to increased risks. They astutely observed that the developer, Activision-Blizzard, exerted full control over every facet of the Overwatch esports ecosystem, thereby rendering it arduous for tier two teams and grassroots/amateur teams to thrive or even subsist. This observation resonated with the intricate power dynamics existing between developers, players, and fans; a lack of meaningful avenues for fan participation can erode enthusiasm and result in waning interest. Scholz and Stein substantiated their argument by pointing to the decline in viewership numbers between Overwatch League season 1 and season 2 as an illustrative example. There are parallels between their findings and this research, particularly in terms of the symbiotic relationship between fan communities and developers, wherein robust engagement channels are essential for sustaining long-term fan interest. Enterprises that fail to provide fans with viable means of official engagement

risk appearing unappreciative of the substantial contributions made by their fan base, notwithstanding that the popularity of these games inherently hinges on fan support. While Scholz and Stein's model serves its purpose within a business context, it is somewhat rigid, as it may not readily accommodate fluid movement across multiple layers. However, building upon this conceptual framework while crafting a more comprehensive framework for orbital fandom can benefit the domain of videogame spectatorship.

By delving into esports, this thesis can explore the intricate relationships between players, teams, organisers, and fans, which often involve a complex interplay of passion, fandom, and business. Understanding the dynamics of esports is crucial for comprehending the full spectrum of game spectatorship, including how fans engage with professional players, teams, and tournaments. Moreover, esports have influenced the development of streaming platforms and have given rise to unique monetisation and participation models within the gaming community. This inclusion allows the research to encompass the entire gaming ecosystem, from casual viewership to highly competitive play, offering a comprehensive understanding of modern gaming spectatorship culture.

2.3.4. VTubing/VTubers

VTubing, short for Virtual YouTubing, constitutes a phenomenon in which online content creators employ virtual avatars as central elements in their productions (Lu et al 2021). These productions can be pre-recorded videos or streams. It is worth noting that while the term “VTuber” originates from “Virtual YouTuber,” these creators are not limited to the YouTube platform for content dissemination. The utilisation of virtual avatars offers VTubers a unique opportunity to engage in various activities beyond the constraints of their physical existence, simultaneously affording them the means to shield their real-world identities. This protective measure is often undertaken to mitigate certain aspects of parasocial fandom. VTubers emerged in 2016 and surged in popularity in 2020, becoming a staple of videogame content creation culture (Ferreira et al., 2022). They frequently top the most-watched streamer lists in terms of watch hours as well lists for most super-chat donations on YouTube (Diff Inc, 2024).

VTubers can be independent, creating and retaining their own persona, or they may be affiliated with a company, where the intellectual property of the persona belongs

to the organisation and the character is performed by an employee. Heavily influenced by the Japanese Idol (*Idoru*) Industry (girls chosen to join a musical group not based on their skill but looks) (Aoyagi 2000), Japanese VTubers embrace a corporate model, where the performers are paid employees who do not own the intellectual property of their avatars. One of the inherent advantages of adopting a virtual persona lies in the flexibility of intellectual property (IP) utilisation across diverse industries. Collaborative marketing ventures, a long-established practice involving Japanese Idol groups, seamlessly extends to VTubers, allowing for more intricate and expansive collaborations. VTuber avatars can be customarily redesigned with specialised costumes for promotional partnerships or even integrated into videogames as playable characters. The marketing and IP potential of VTubers is expansive, exemplified by the Japanese corporation Hololive, which secured approval for an initial public offering (IPO) on the Tokyo Stock Exchange in February 2023, boasting a valuation of \$320 million USD.

In addition, many VTuber tropes, such as “debuting,” “generations” and “graduation, are direct influences from this Idol Industry. For example, the concept of graduation can be traced back to the early traditions of one of the pioneering Idol groups, Onyanko Club, the 1980s. Drawing on this precedent, the departure of a VTuber from the Japanese corporate VTubing group Hololive is often euphemistically referred to as a “graduation.” This term can encompass a range of scenarios, including resignations, terminations, or contract non-renewals. Finally, VTubers frequently craft and present themselves as characters immersed in a narrative or “kayfabe” persona. Within this constructed framework, fictitious backgrounds, relationships, and events are portrayed as factual, contributing to the immersive VTuber experience.

Including VTubers in this research is crucial because they represent a unique and rapidly growing phenomenon within the realm of game spectatorship and online fandom. VTubers have a dedicated fanbase, and their content often blurs the lines between gaming, entertainment, and identity. Understanding their role in the gaming ecosystem provides valuable insights into the evolving nature of game spectatorship, online communities, and the ways in which technology is shaping new forms of fan engagement. This inclusion allows the research to remain current and relevant to contemporary gaming culture. VTuber fandoms span-worldwide with fans engaging in many forms of fan-labour to create fan-works such as art, cosplay and even public

advertising campaigns for their favourite VTubers. When a special anniversary such as a birthday or anniversary is approaching, fans have been known to pool resources to pay for advertising space on famous landmarks such as Times Square in New York (AboveUp 2021) or on the sails of Hong Kong's last iconic Junk boat (AintNoUniqueUsername 2022a). These campaigns involve a lot of coordination and monetary contribution no matter where they take place.

From the perspective of this research, it is imperative to acknowledge that VTubers actively foster parasocial relationships with their viewers. For instance, VTuber Ironmouse affectionately refers to her subscribers as her "precious family," connoting an intimate familial bond with her audience. Additionally, other VTubers tailor the nomenclature of their fanbase to align with the thematic elements of their VTuber personas. Consider Calliope Mori, a VTuber who refers to her fans as "Deadbeats," a moniker derived from her persona as the apprentice of the Grim Reaper, combined with her involvement in the realm of rap music. In the context of Hololive, these fan-designated names are often accompanied by a mascot character personifying the fanbase. These mascots are employed by VTubers in fan-generated and official content to underscore the close relationship between the VTuber and their fandom. As an example, Calliope Mori's "Deadbeats" are symbolised by a stylish skeleton character sporting sunglasses, making recurrent appearances in her music videos and official merchandise.

2.4. Parasocial Relationship

Parasocial relationships; defined as one-sided relationships in which a fan invests emotional energy, attention, and loyalty into a figure who is largely unaware of their existence are particularly prevalent in gaming-related content. The phrase was first coined in 1956 by Horton and Wohl who were researching the interactions between mass media consumers and media figures (Pearse & Rubin, 1989). In the context of traditional television, even highly devoted fans had limited opportunities for engagement, as media personalities appeared only occasionally across a restricted number of channels and formats (Jenkins, 1992). By contrast, in the contemporary digital environment, leading livestreamers may broadcast unfiltered content for up to eight hours a day, seven days a week, with livestreaming constituting their full-time occupation

(Taylor, 2018). The volume of exposure and information now available about such media figures is vastly greater than in the past, significantly altering the intensity and structure of parasocial engagement.

The term 'parasocial' has permeated everyday discourse within the livestreaming and broader content creation fandom community. Viewers now routinely refer to certain behaviours as *parasocial*, using the term to critique or explain emotionally charged relationships with content creators. In some cases, the slang term 'parasocial-Andy' has emerged; a phrase that originated in early livestreaming communities, where the suffix '-Andy' was used to distinguish participants who shared the same name. Today, *parasocial-Andy* is often used dismissively, typically as a label to frame certain types of criticism or emotional investment as excessive or inappropriate. The term has thus evolved into a rhetorical device, sometimes used by creators or fellow fans to delegitimise dissent or deflect critique by suggesting that the critic is unhealthily invested. For example, a keyword search for the term 'parasocial' on the Reddit forum to top livestreamer xQc yields over a thousand results. Many of these take the form of memes or posts that highlight or critique so-called 'parasocial fans.'

This evolving use of parasocial language underscores the importance of examining the emotional and psychological aspects of fan engagement. These relationships significantly shape fan behaviour, including financial support and participatory actions such as commenting, sharing, or defending a creator online. In this regard, parasociality is not merely a social phenomenon; it carries economic and ethical implications, as these relationships enable creators to monetise intimacy and contribute to broader platform economies. They allow creators to monetise intimacy through mechanisms such as donations, subscriptions, and branded content. Simultaneously, they incentivise platforms to promote content that fosters high levels of viewer engagement.

This thesis argues that parasociality is a key mechanism through which value flows in gaming fandoms, linking affective labour to financial exchange. Fans' emotional investments support creators financially, help sustain platform economies and contribute to the visibility and legitimacy of games themselves. Consequently, parasocial relationships are not incidental but foundational to the architecture of contemporary fan economies.

In the context of videogame spectatorship, parasocial engagement is especially pronounced. For example, Let's Players may upload videos daily, resulting in fans seeing the content creator more frequently than their real-life friends. In esports, the livestreamed nature of tournaments allows fans to follow their favourite players' both on and off the competitive stage, cultivating a sense of personal familiarity. VTubers, in particular, employ techniques that intentionally deepen parasocial connection. These include addressing the audience collectively "chat" rather than individuals and giving their fanbase a distinctive name to foster identity and belong. Many VTuber groups frame themselves as virtual idol collectives, offering birthday-themed merchandise and even holding public meet-and-greet-events. Key to the VTuber experience is *kayfabe* (Laine 2018); the performance of a functional character whose identity is distinct from the human performer. This maintained illusion allows fans to suspend disbelief and engage with a narrative that is insulated from real-world disruptions. As a result, elaborate lore and character backstories are able to evolve independently of the performer's real-life circumstances. This performative distance also benefits the content creator, who can remain anonymous in ways that traditional creators often cannot.

Parasocial relationships in videogames spectatorship are further reinforced by the perceived closeness of the content creators. Unlike traditional celebrities such as film actors, who are typically distanced by media industries and social hierarchies, gaming creators maintain active presence across multiple platforms, interact directly with their audiences, and produce content that feels participatory and achievable. A fan of an actor may not aspire to become a film star, but a videogame spectator fan is already engaged in the same activity: playing games. This shared practice fosters a sense of proximity and familiarity, which in turn strengthens emotional bonds and contributes to the formation of highly invested fan communities.

2.5. Fan Labour and Value Creation

Extensive scholarly inquiry has been directed towards the examination of business models within both the videogame industry (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013) and the esports industry (Scholz & Volker, 2019). Nevertheless, there exists a noticeable want for research focused on the intricate interplay between business dynamics and fans within the realm of videogames. Within the existing literature, two predominant

perspectives emerge as focal points when considering the nexus of videogame business and fandom: fan labour and value creation.

The “fan labour” perspective underscores the active contributions made by fans, extending beyond the realms of traditional consumerism. This framework posits that fans actively participate in the creation and dissemination of content, thereby significantly impacting the products and brands they ardently support. This form of participatory engagement often transcends the conventional roles of consumers, as fans not only consume content but also actively generate it, contributing to the overall value of the product or brand.

Conversely, the “value creation” perspective interrogates the complex ways in which fans contribute to the value chain of videogame businesses. This perspective encompasses the economic, cultural, and social dimensions of fan engagement. Fans are recognised not merely as consumers but as co-creators of value. Their activities, such as generating user-generated content, engaging in fan communities, or participating in fan events, collectively enhance the value proposition of the videogame product or brand. In essence, fans assume an integral role in augmenting the overall worth and impact of the industry.

2.5.1. Fan Labour

The concept “Playbour”, coined by Kücklich (2005), refers to fan labour carried out through the act of play. This term captures the idea that certain fan activities, while often not recognised as conventional forms of labour due to their play-like nature, nonetheless contribute meaningfully to the fan community. Sotamaa (2007) expanded on this idea by examining transformative play in games that rely on player productivity, thereby shifting the power dynamic between game developers and players. This thesis aligns with Sotamaa’s perspective, recognising that player-driven productivity not only enriches game cultures but also reconfigures traditional hierarchies between producers and audiences.

At the 2019 Digital Games Research Association Conference (DiGRA) in Kyoto, Chia et al. presented ‘Game Production beyond the Studio: From Playbour to Gamework’, which further develop the evolving concept of playbour. The authors called

for a re-evaluation of the term, especially in the light of the changes to digital landscape since it was first introduced. One of the key interventions was the distinction between playbour used for non-profit verse for-profit contexts. In non-profit Live Action Role Playing (LARP) communities, playbour often operates within a flat, non-hierarchical power structure where a plurality of voices can be heard. This stands in contrast to the more hierarchical and extractive power dynamics that often design the relationship between game developers and fans. While playbour in non-profit settings is often perceived as legitimate, for-profit companies that monetise fan-generated content are frequently criticised for exploiting unpaid fan labour within a capitalist system.

Additionally, the realm of the “gig economy” should be acknowledged, as it has experienced significant growth in recent years, driven by the increasing prevalence of short-term, flexible, and freelance forms for work. Within this context, fans may not expect compensation for their creative contributions, or they may accept minimal remuneration. Online platforms such as Patreon or Ko-Fi allow fan-creators to receive donations or subscriptions from other fans, offering a form of direct monetary support without requiring the delivery of a specific product in return. These developments, largely facilitated by the internet and platform-based economies, reflects broader shifts within capitalism, they highlight the need for new conceptual frameworks and to better understand the evolving landscape of fan labour, playbour, and the relationship between fans and developers.

Meanwhile, as discussed earlier, the digital age had catalysed the emergence of a new breed of active fans in the realm of videogame content creator fandoms. This new breed of fans is characterised by their engagement in a various of fan labour. Such labour encompasses various activities undertaken by fans within their respective fandoms that result in tangible outputs, including creating fan art, writing comments, and engaging with others through digital platforms. Such practices are centre to the participatory culture that surrounds videogame content creators, as fans do not merely consume content, but actively circulation and meaning through their creation.

Incorporating an examination of intellectual property rights (IPR) into the research is highly significant when exploring fan-based labour within videogame fandoms. IPR serves as a fundamental framework that defines the boundaries within which fan creativity operates. As articulated by Jenkins (2006), fans engage in

multifaceted and innovative activities, ranging from fan art to derivative works, all of which are intricately tied to IPR regulations (Broussard, 2007). This research benefits significantly from an analysis of how IPR influences and shapes the dynamics within these communities. By investigating IPR's impact, a deeper understanding of the power dynamics, relationships between various stakeholders, and the motivation of fan labourers is achieved. Fan fiction, as one prominent aspect of fan-based labour, can provide a valuable insight into how IPR can both enable and hinder creative expressions within videogame fandoms (Schwabach, 2016). The interplay between fan creativity and IPR is a central theme in the context of fan-based labour. It is important to recognise that IPR can act as both a catalyst and a barrier, and it plays a pivotal role in shaping the landscape of fan activities (Hellekson 2009; Hellekson & Busse, 2014). Including IPR in the research allows for a comprehensive exploration of the legal constraints, freedoms, and the intricacies of creativity, participation, and exploitation within videogame fandoms. Such an analysis can provide valuable insights into the experiences and behaviours of fan labourers, enriching the research with a nuanced understanding of this intricate domain (Broussard, 2007).

As the consumption of videogame spectatorship media surges online, videogame intellectual property (IPR) holders face a delicate balancing act, striving to permit content creators and orbital fans to use their IPR, while grappling with an influx of aggressive copyright lawsuits and DMCA takedowns. Such actions can cast the game IP holders in a negative light, as they are perceived as stifling their fanbase, which is primarily driven by a desire to share their affection for the IPR. Consequently, this can lead to adverse consequences when IP holders subsequently enforce their copyrights against legitimate breaches. Although companies are well within their rights to protect their IP, the value accrued from fair use cases can ultimately outweigh the potential downsides.

Another legal facet worthy of consideration in the creation of value utilising videogame IP pertains to agreements forged between game IP holders and the players themselves. These typically manifest as End-User-License-Agreements (EULA) and Terms of Service (ToS), legal contracts entered into between software developers/vendors and software users, outlining acceptable user conduct. These agreements often entail a substantial block of legal text, routinely overlooked by users who swiftly click "I accept" when installing new software. EULAs are conceived to limit

the liability of software developers/vendors in cases of improper software use by the end-user. However, some developers/vendors have started incorporating copyright protection clauses into their EULA agreements, thereby circumventing copyright exceptions such as fair use. Developers may resort to banning users from their games if they breach the EULA or ToS, even though certain fan activities, such as game modifications (modding), inherently violate these agreements. In such cases, companies are confronted with the challenge of responding to the violation of a legal contract whose primary purpose is to mitigate their liability. Modding is an exemplary form of transformative fan labour, yet many game IP holders have previously terminated such activities (Patrick, 2020). Some game developers, like Nintendo, have even outlined guidelines for permissible fan labour activities related to their games (Nintendo, 2018), distinguishing between acceptable and prohibited practices.

While fan labour exists across a range of cultural industries, videogame fandom presents distinct characteristics that shape how such labour is produced and circulated. Videogames are inherently interactive systems, meaning that engagement is not limited to interpretation but involves active participation through play. This positions fans not simply as audiences but as co-performers of the text, with each playthrough generating new experiences that may be shared, recorded, or transformed into content. At the same time, videogames are structured as systems of rules and mechanics rather than fixed narratives, allowing fans to experiment with, manipulate, and reinterpret these systems in ways that extend beyond the original design intentions. This system-oriented nature underpins practices such as challenge runs, speedrunning, and emergent gameplay content. Videogames also often support forms of modifiability, whether through formal tools or informal practices, enabling fans to alter assets, mechanics, or aesthetics and thereby blur the boundary between amateur creativity and production. In addition, fan labour in videogame contexts is deeply embedded within platform infrastructures such as streaming and video-sharing services, where visibility, circulation, and sustainability are shaped by algorithmic recommendation systems and audience metrics. These platforms not only distribute content but actively structure what kinds of fan labour are viable or rewarded. Finally, videogames operate within extended temporal cycles, sustained through updates, live services, and ongoing community engagement, allowing fan contributions to accumulate and evolve over time. Together, these characteristics

produce a form of fan labour that is iterative, system-oriented, platform-dependent, and temporally extended, distinguishing it from fan practices in other media contexts.

2.5.2. Value Creation

Chia et al. draws the various forms of value associated with playbour, including cultural; the spreading of a concept throughout culture, social; how it can increase your social standing, and capital; how it can make money for you. Capital value refers to monetary worth, social value pertains relationships and networks formed through participations; and cultural value involves the diffusion and recognition of the culture within broader society. The authors highlight the complexities that arise when fan labour intersects with market forces. For instance, hobbyists who create games for fun may attempt to resist commercial pressures, positional their work as an artistic pursuit rather than economic. However, as fan creators and consumers engage in the process of digitally mediated production and circulation, the boundaries between creative freedom and capitalist labour become increasingly blurred.

Finally, legal discussion surrounding “fair use” (Tushnet, 2017) are also relevant to questions of value creation. The fair use doctrine permits individuals to engage with existing intellectual property in ways that are transformative, thereby contributing to new cultural forms and meanings. Yet, explorations of value creation within videogames have historically focused on industrial facets, positioning players primarily as passive consumers (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). Given the rapid evolution of the videogame industry, and increasing visibility of participatory fan practices, such models may no longer suffice. There is a growing need to recognise and account for the contribution of *productive and active fans* in shaping the cultural and symbolic value of videogame content.

To examine value creation, it becomes imperative to first delineate what constitutes value within the context of the stakeholder ecosystem. Bowman and Ambrosini (2002) offers a useful distinction between use value and exchange value, arguing that new use values emanate from labour enacted by organisational members and, in turn, contribute to profit generation. They further assert that value capture hinges on the power dynamics between buyers and sellers. Upon reviewing their work, I recognised the relevance of these concepts to the ecosystem of videogame

spectatorship and began to envisage potential avenues for their analytical application. Conversely, Heskett (2008) challenge traditional models of production, which are primarily centred on labour and capital. He argues that such frameworks fail to adequately encapsulate the “what,” “why,” or “how” of production, particularly when it comes to capture value beyond the monetary. This critique is especially pertinent to this study, where much the value generated remains unmonetised. As such, it may be prudent to explore alternative frameworks for evaluating fan labour and its contribution. Another perspective worth considering in is that of value chains, as proposed by Porter (1985). Porter’s framework conceptualised an organisation as a series of interconnected subsystems, each involving inputs, transformation processes, and outputs, that collectively generate value. Within this logic, videogame developers and content creators may be seen as analogous to organisations. Applying this perspective enables a more systematic understanding of how various form of engagement contributes to the overall ecosystem.

In this thesis, value is understood as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing cultural, social, and economic forms that emerge through fan practices. Rather than being limited to monetary exchange, value includes recognition, visibility, community belonging, and affective investment. Importantly, value is approached at various levels. At the level of experience, value is perceived and articulated by participants through their engagement with platforms and communities. At the level of practice, value is generated through fan labour and creative production. At the structural level, value circulates and is unevenly recognised across platforms, creators, and developers. In this sense, the thesis extends existing discussions of playbour by shifting attention from labour alone to the processes through which value is generated, circulated, and recognised within a multi-actor ecosystem.

2.6. Legal Infrastructures and Platform Governance

Finally, the thesis draws on platform studies and the political economy of media to examine the infrastructural systems that govern fan participation. Scholars such as Tarleton Gillespie (2010) and Nieborg and Poell (2018) have emphasized that platforms are not passive conduits of content but active agents that structure cultural production

through algorithmic curation, monetisation policies, and content moderation. This thesis adopts this perspective to analyse how platforms such as YouTube and Twitch mediate the visibility, viability, and economic sustainability of fan labour. It considers how algorithmic recommendation systems, terms of service, and monetisation eligibility criteria shape which voices are amplified, which forms of content are rewarded, and which communities are marginalized.

Platform governance operates in tandem with corporate game development to produce a dual structure of control. While developers exert authority over game content and intellectual property, platforms regulate the conditions under which that content is distributed, monetised, and engaged with by audiences. This dual regulation has profound implications for fan autonomy, creative expression, and labour rights. It constrains the possibilities of participation even as it appears to democratize them, embedding fandom within an economic system that prioritizes corporate profitability over community wellbeing.

To more fully understand the constraints placed on fan labour, it is also necessary to consider the legal infrastructures that underpin platform-based content creation. The entire ecosystem of videogame spectatorship operates within a legal grey area shaped by the doctrine of “fair use” (Tushnet, 2017). This principle, codified in U.S. law (17 U.S.C. § 107), permits the limited use of copyrighted materials under specific circumstances, including for commentary, criticism, and scholarship. However, the application of fair use remains highly complex and often misunderstood, even among creators who depend on it for their livelihood. As platforms like YouTube and Twitch are headquartered in the United States, their operations are governed by U.S. legal standards further elevating the significance of American copyright law within global fan communities. The international reach of this legal model, including its partial adoption in places such as Hong Kong (Yu, 2019), extends its influence beyond U.S. borders.

Although not specific to videogame fandom, two high-profile cases; *Hossein-zadeh v. Klein* (2017) and *Hughes v. Benjamin* (2020) have helped establish legal precedent for the transformative use of copyrighted material on platforms like YouTube. In both instances, courts ruled in favour of the creators, strengthening the legitimacy of fair use within online content creation. Alongside fair use, DMCA, enacted in 1998, forms a key pillar of platform governance. It enables copyright holders to issue

takedown notices and limits the liability of platforms when users upload infringing content. While this legislation is designed to protect copyright, it has become increasingly susceptible to abuse.

One particularly concerning development is the growing use of automated systems, often powered by artificial intelligence, to identify and remove potentially infringing material. Platforms like YouTube rely on these systems to issue DMCA strikes, yet such automation frequently fails to account for the contextual nuance of fair use, leading to erroneous or unjust takedowns (Burk, 2019). Creators may contest these claims, but the dispute process can be opaque and burdensome, often requiring legal intervention. Given the high financial costs and emotional strain associated with challenging takedown notices, many creators choose to forgo appeals altogether.

In some instances, the DMCA has been weaponised by developers themselves. A notable case involves Battlestate Games, the developer of *Escape from Tarkov*, which issued numerous takedown notices to remove YouTube videos that criticised the game, framing them as misinformation (Tinner, 2018). This example highlights how copyright law can be used not only to protect intellectual property but also to silence dissent and suppress critical fan engagement. As such, the current legal and platform governance landscape places creators, particularly those operating within orbital fandoms, in a precarious position where their labour is celebrated, circulated, and monetised, yet also subject to surveillance, restriction, and erasure.

2.7. Summary

This chapter has reviewed the major strands of literature relevant to the study of videogame fandom, with a particular focus on participatory practices, spectatorship, fan labour, and platform governance. It has traced how scholars have theorised fans as active and productive participants, examined the emergence of spectatorship as a primary mode of videogame engagement, and explored the economic and affective dimensions of fan labour in digital environments. This topic has gained increasing attention from scholars across fan studies, media studies, platform studies, digital labour theory, and game studies, reflecting its interdisciplinary significance. While these bodies of work provide a robust foundation, they tend to focus on fans of the game itself; often overlooking those who engage with derivative or mediated forms of content. In

identifying this gap, the chapter sets the stage for the next, which introduces the concept of orbital fandom as a way of accounting for fan communities whose practices are shaped not only by the game but by the layered ecosystems of creators, platforms, and audiences that surround it.

Chapter 3.

Defining Orbital Fandom

3.1. Introduction

Building on the preceding literature review, which examined the intersections of videogame spectatorship, fan labour, platform economies, and participatory culture, this chapter articulates a new framework for understanding fandoms that emerge at the outskirts of the original videogame text. These are communities and practices formed not through direct engagement with the game itself, but through engagement with other fans, derivative content, or fan creators. In such cases, fandom operates at a secondary or tertiary level, orbiting around, rather than anchored within, the original intellectual property.

This chapter introduces new research by proposing the concept of *orbital fandom*, addressing a gap in existing scholarship. While fan studies has extensively theorised fans and examined fans of media texts, no framework has yet captured the phenomenon of fans whose primary attachments are to other fans or content creators. By formalising this concept, the thesis makes a key original contribution to the study of videogame cultures, offering a new vocabulary for understanding the layered and decentralised dynamics of contemporary fan engagement.

The concept of orbital fandom is proposed to capture the layered and decentralised nature of fan engagement in contemporary digital cultures. In many cases, fans may become active participants in a fandom centred around a content creator, livestreamer, or virtual performer, despite never having played the game that initially inspired this content. These forms of engagement produce distinctive fan cultures that merit analytical attention in their own right, particularly as they generate economic, cultural, and social value. Traditional models of fan analysis, often structured around direct interaction with media texts, do not fully account for these complex, platform-mediated dynamics.

Building on the notion of orbital fandom, I introduce the concept of *secondary anchor fandoms* to describe communities whose primary attachments are not to the original media text but to derivative or mediated points of engagement. In these cases, the “anchor” for fan identity and participation is displaced: rather than being grounded in a videogame itself, the anchor may be a Let’s Player, VTuber, or fan artist whose creative work attracts and sustains a following. The fandom orbits the game at one or more removes, but it is stabilised around these secondary anchors. Such fandoms exhibit their own forms of creativity, community, and value production, often evolving independently of the original intellectual property.

3.2. Orbital Fandom

Orbital Fandom is proposed in this thesis as a conceptual and analytic respond to the gaps identified in existing fandom studies. It refers to a form of fandom that emerges at least one step removed from an intellectual property right (IP). In the context of videogames, a developer releases a game; fans of the game create derivative content using the game’s IP. These content creators may then attract their own fan communities, comprised of individuals who may or may not be fans of the original game itself. It is these fans, whose engagement orbits around derivative content rather than the game’s IP directly, that I define as orbital fans.

The terminology used to describe academic concepts carries particular weight, especially when seeking to capture the nuanced relationships and hierarchies embedded in complex phenomena. In this thesis, naming the fandom that emerges from pre-existing videogame fandoms has been a reflective process. The eventual choice of the term “Orbital Fandom” followed careful evolution of a number of alternatives, each carrying its own connotations and limitations. One of the initial terms considered was “Secondary Fandom,” which aptly described the relationship between these communities and their primary source, the videogame.

The term “secondary” highlighted the hierarchical structure positioning these fandoms in relation to the original; the primary video games fandom, but it also risked implying inferiority. While such a misreading could be clarified through a detailed definition, it was intimately felt that the primary terms should not invite confusion or misinterpretation at first glance. Another term explored was “ancillary Fandom,” which

implied a model in which the videogame remained central and the surrounding fan practices played a supporting or supplementary role to the main fandom.

However, this framing proved problematic. Many of the fandoms in question are not essential to the primary videogame fandom, and in some cases, develop into independent communities that no longer maintain meaningful tie with the primary fandom. The term "Meta Fandom" was also considered, owing to its connotation of self-reference, which resonated with layered and reflexive nature of the phenomenon. However, existing usages of "meta-fandom, to describe fan-authored commentary on other fandoms, and its potential association with the term "metaverse" or the technology company Meta in video game discourse raised concerns about ambiguity and prior usage.

Ultimately, "Orbital Fandom" was selected as the most appropriate term. It is concise, accessible, and evocative. The term suggests both proximity and hierarchy: a fandom that revolves around another, deriving its momentum and context from the primary source. Importantly, the metaphor also allows for possibility and disengagement, as what orbits may eventually drift away. While not intended as a direct comparison to scientific models of orbit, the term encapsulates the relational and dynamic nature of the phenomenon. As such, orbital fandom offers a useful and flexible analytical framework through which to examine these forms of mediated fan engagement. Engagement.

3.3. Distinguishing Orbital from Primary Fandom

Distinguishing "Orbital Fandom" from "Primary Fandom" is essential for understanding the intricate dynamics within the broader videogame ecosystem. These terms clarify the different modes of engagement, production, and value that fans generate in relation to video intellectual property.

"Primary fandom" refers to fans whose engagement centers on the original videogame text. These individuals interact directly with the game, playing, modifying, or discussing its content, form the foundational community around a given title. Their relationship with the game is direct and immersive, grounded in the core experience offered by the developers. In contrast, "orbital fandom" refers to a layer of fan engagement that emerges from, but not always remain tethered to, the primary fandom.

These fans often engage with derivative content that draws upon the themes, characters, or cultural appeal of the original game. Crucially, orbital fans may not be players of the game themselves; rather, their participation revolves around content creators or community practices inspired by the game.

The distinction is not hierarchical in a value-driven sense but instead reflects different structural positions within fandom landscape. Orbital fandom underscores the transformative capacity of the primary fandom; it shows how fans can evolve into content creators, developing independent fan communities, or even build their own identities, all while referring the original game IP. This capacity for transformation is often negotiated with the complex copyright regulations. Recognising this distinction has practical implications. For game developers and creators, acknowledge orbital fandom opens pathway for collaboration, community-building, and value creation beyond traditional marketing or fan-service strategies. partnerships, brand endorsements, or subtle in-game reference to prominent fan creators represent a shift toward reciprocal recognition. Such recognition fosters a sense of mutual appreciation and synergy between the creators of the primary game and the fans who orbit around it. It also highlights the protentional influence of fans on platform economies, cultural discourse, and the broader visibility of games.

Crucially, this differentiation serves as a linchpin for delineating "Orbital Videogame Fandom" from its "Primary Videogame Fandom" counterpart. This distinction is pivotal for comprehending the distinctive roles and activities that fans assume within the orbital fandom ecosystem. The example of "clippers, fans who edit and re-upload highlights from primary fans' content, is illustrative. These individuals curate and repurpose content under their distinct brand, expanding its reach while contributing to the cultural footprint of both the creators and the game. This showcases how orbital fans, by curating and sharing content, contribute to the broader impact of the primary fandom.

This shift reconfigures the relationship between videogames and their audiences in fundamental ways. In earlier models of fandom, the game text functions as the central anchor around which participation is organised, with engagement primarily structured through play and direct interaction. However, in the contexts examined in this thesis, engagement is increasingly mediated through creators, platforms, and community

practices. As a result, the game persists as a reference point but is no longer the sole or even primary locus of attachment. Instead, fans may develop sustained forms of engagement through watching livestreams, following creator-driven content, or participating in platform-based communities, often without direct interaction with the game itself. This produces a layered and distributed relationship in which the game becomes one element within a wider ecosystem of mediated engagement rather than its organising centre. Importantly, this does not imply a disconnection from the game, but rather a reorientation of how that connection is maintained. The relationship is sustained through circulation, visibility, and social interaction, rather than through gameplay alone. In this sense, fandom operates at varying degrees of remove from the original text, while still contributing to its cultural presence and ongoing relevance. This reconfiguration forms the basis of orbital fandom, which accounts for how engagement is organised across multiple points of attachment within a platformed and creator-driven environment.

While orbital fandom provides a framework for understanding forms of engagement that are displaced from the primary game text, it is necessary to clarify the conceptual boundaries of this term in order to distinguish it from adjacent frameworks. Orbital fandom does not refer to all forms of content creator fandom, nor does it encompass the entirety of platform-based audience activity. Rather, it describes a specific configuration of fan engagement in which attachment is reoriented toward secondary anchors, such as content creators or communities, while remaining derivatively connected to an originating game or intellectual property. In this sense, the presence of a traceable relationship to the original text is a necessary condition of orbital fandom, even where direct engagement with that text is minimal or absent.

Orbital fandom describes a reconfiguration of videogame fandom in which attachment is displaced from the primary game text toward secondary anchors such as content creators, communities, and platform-mediated interactions. While these engagements remain derivatively connected to the originating intellectual property, the game itself is no longer the primary site of affective or participatory investment. This shift reveals how value in contemporary game cultures is increasingly generated and organised through intermediary actors within platformed ecosystems.

This distinction is particularly important in differentiating orbital fandom from broader forms of influencer or creator fandom, which may exist independently of any

underlying media text. While such fandoms share structural similarities, including parasocial attachment and platform-mediated visibility, they do not necessarily retain a meaningful connection to a source text in the manner required for orbital analysis. Similarly, not all instances of videogame spectatorship constitute orbital fandom. Casual or episodic viewing, for example, may involve observation without the sustained affective investment, community participation, or value circulation that characterise fandom. Orbital fandom therefore implies not only a shift in the object of attachment, but also the emergence of durable fan practices and relational structures around that attachment.

Furthermore, the degree of removal from the original game text is not uniform, but operates along a spectrum. In some cases, fans may engage primarily with creators who remain closely tied to a specific game, while in others, the connection to the originating text may become increasingly diffuse over time. Orbital fandom does not require a fixed number of degrees of separation; rather, it is defined by the displacement of the primary point of engagement and the persistence of a secondary anchor that organises fan activity. This allows the concept to account for both tightly coupled and more loosely connected forms of engagement, while maintaining analytical coherence through the continued presence of an underlying textual relationship.

By establishing these boundaries, orbital fandom can be distinguished from existing frameworks such as participatory culture, influencer studies, and general spectatorship. While it shares elements with each, its analytical focus lies specifically in the reconfiguration of fan attachment and value formation away from the primary text and toward intermediary actors within platformed ecosystems. This boundary clarification ensures that orbital fandom functions not as an umbrella term for all mediated engagement, but as a targeted framework for analysing a particular structural shift in contemporary videogame fandom.

Building on the notion of orbital fandom, I introduce the concept of secondary anchor fandoms to describe communities whose primary attachments are not to the original media text but to derivative or mediated points of engagement. In these cases, the “anchor” for fan identity and participation is displaced: rather than being grounded in a videogame itself, the anchor may be a Let’s Player, VTuber, or fan artist whose creative work attracts and sustains a following. The fandom orbits the game at one or more times removed, but it is stabilised around these secondary anchors. Such fandoms

exhibit their own forms of creativity, community, and value production, often evolving independently of the original intellectual property.

What distinguishes these secondary anchor fandoms from conventional fandoms is not only their distance from the source text, but their capacity to generate new, durable cultures of engagement that may outlive the relevance of the original game. A VTuber's fanbase, for example, may continue to thrive even as the titles they stream fall out of popularity, because the anchor point for fandom has shifted from the game to the performer. This displacement of the anchor reflects broader transformations in platformed fan cultures, where attention and affect are increasingly concentrated on derivative creators rather than canonical texts.

3.4. Practices and Value in Orbital Fandom

A defining characteristic of Orbital videogame fandom is its dependency on a connection to the primary fandom. Orbital fan practices do not exist in isolation; rather they rely on and are interwoven with primary fandoms. This distinction is not intended as a value judgement but instead serve to articulate the unique dynamics at play when emerge between primary and orbital forms of engagement.

To illustrate this point, we might consider the example of fan artists. A fan artist drawing a character like Super Mario is clearly operating within the realm of the primary videogame fandom, as the work directly references the original videogame text. However, if that same fan artist creates an artwork depicting their favourite videogame YouTuber dressed as Super Mario, they enter the domain of the orbital fandom. Here, the content relies on two layers: the primary IP (Super Mario) and a fan-creator whose work integrates a primary fan (the YouTuber). The motivations for creating these orbital fan-works vary widely. Some fans may aim to accrue social, cultural, or monetary capital within the fandom, while others may simply create to express their love for it. Still, others use these fan-works as a means to enhance their skills, such as painting or video editing, which can benefit them in other contexts.

While many types of orbital videogame fandom fan-works overlap with those created by primary fans, some are unique to the orbital realm. A prime example is fan-made animations using audio from primary fan content, like Let's Plays and livestreams. These animations wouldn't exist without the audio from the primary fan content. Similar examples using this audio include video remixes, music remixes, and translation clips, all of which leverage primary fan content to create distinct orbital fan-works. Importantly, the audiences for primary and orbital fan-works can differ significantly. Not all consumers of orbital fan-works are necessarily fans of the primary fan content, demonstrating the diversity within the fandom ecosystem.

A complex relationship between a videogame fan project and its fandom is exemplified by the band StarBomb, known for creating comedic songs with a videogame theme. Two of the band members are Let's Players on the Game Grumps YouTube channel, with their own pre-existing audience interested in videogame-based content. One of these is Arin Hanson, who was a successful videogame parody animator before joining Game Grumps, attracting his fan base. Additionally, two StarBomb members are part of an unrelated comedy band called Ninja Sex Party, with its own distinct following and fans. This multiplicity of fan bases creates a multi-layered fandom structure. The thematic focus of StarBomb's songs is videogames, which attracts its fan base, but the artists also have fans from different backgrounds. For instance, some are fans of the orbital videogame fandom associated with Let's Players, while others are fans of their unrelated careers, such as music or animation. Furthermore, StarBomb's songs are uploaded to Arin Hanson's personal animation YouTube channel, impacting their fan reach. Some fans may have organically discovered StarBomb without being part of any of the aforementioned fandoms. The legal landscape surrounding these orbital fan projects is complex; while they may operate within fair use and parody law (as per Sheldon 2006, Tushnet 2009, Kretzschmar & Stanfill 2019), certain large videogame developers have taken legal action against other orbital fan projects (as seen in Kamen 2016, Chalk 2017, Plunkett 2019).

Even in cases where fans are actively engaged during the Beta testing phase of game development, companies may still occasionally miscalculate the perceived value from the standpoint of their fanbase. A recent example of this is the Star Wars Battlefront 2 'lootbox' controversy. A vigilant fan discerned that, on average, it would require 80

hours of gameplay to unlock each hero in the game. This observation led to the speculation that the considerable time investment was a deliberate design choice, intended to encourage to make in-game purchases in order to expedite hero unlocks. In response to fans' concerns on the Reddit forum, a community manager offered a reply that was widely perceived as tone-deaf, contending that the extensive hours required for in-game item acquisition were intended to provide players with "a sense of pride and accomplishment" (EACommunityTeam, 2017). This response swiftly transformed into a subject of mockery and internet meme culture, amassing over 600,000 downvotes (a feature that enables users to signal disapproval or disagreement with a post or comment) making it the most downvoted post in Reddit's history. The resultant controversy garnered substantial media attention and ultimately compelled the developer to remove the lootbox mechanic, a mystery gambling mechanic, from the game and drastically reduce the time required to unlock new heroes. Lootboxes, a cornerstone of the videogame industry's economic practices, attracted heightened scrutiny following this episode, rendering even previously uninformed players wary of their usage. This incident starkly illustrates how community managers, who are expected to be attuned to the sentiments of the developer's fandom, can, on occasion, inadvertently unintentionally alienate their audience and disregard their time. While this example represents an extreme case, it is not uncommon for videogame fandoms to possess a keen awareness of their value to the companies producing the games, including the number of hours they invest. This highlights the multiplicity of value facets relevant to fans, extending beyond monetary considerations to encompass social and cultural dimensions of influence.

The phenomenon of orbital fandom, at times, exists in complete detachment from the original videogame IP. This intriguing scenario prompts an exploration of how orbital fandoms contribute value to the game, even when not directly affiliated with it. For instance, Let's Players The Game Grumps engaged with a game called Doodle Dates (Game Grumps, 2018), where they were tasked with drawing their dream date which is subsequently integrated into the game's storyline. Due to the imprecise mouse cursor used for drawing input, the final "date" they depicted was notably rudimentary. However, fans of The Game Grumps subsequently created their own fan art inspired by the rudimentary drawing created by the Game Grumps, with some investing hours to produce strikingly detailed and realistic drawings. Evaluating the value of these orbital fan art creations concerning the original game IP might pose a challenge, given their

apparent disconnection in meaning. Nonetheless, these creations hold value for The Game Grumps, akin to art derived from their Let's Play content.

VTuber fans also play into the larger concept of the orbital fandom as VTubers boast complex ecosystems of fans spending extreme amounts of money on fan-made projects for their idols where the money does not go to the VTuber themselves. One VTuber fan group in Hong Kong (HKVIDOLFANS) regularly organises extremely complex fan-made projects to celebrate the birthdays and anniversaries of their favourite Hololive VTubers by buying advertising space on billboards, buses and other public areas of display. One such project to celebrate VTuber Gawr Gura's Birthday and 4 million subscriber milestone involved fully wrapping a public bus with images of Gwar Gura, celebratory posters in MTR (Mass Transit Railway) stations featuring her image, a dedicated website, postcard campaign and a donation to a local shark related charity because of Gwar Gura's persona as a "shark-girl". This fan-organised and funded project in total cost 68,670HK\$ (approximately 8,750US\$) all funded by Hololive fans in Hong Kong (AintNoUniqueUsername 2022b). This is a significant amount of money that remained in this orbital fandom, not directly funding the VTuber Gwar Gura with capital value, but sharing her image in Hong Kong as a form of cultural and social value for the fans to enjoy and appreciate as well as hopefully engage curious non-fans.

While this thesis focuses on fan creators, it is important to recognise that similar platform dynamics also shape contemporary game development. Independent developers, in particular, operate within the same ecosystems of visibility, algorithmic recommendation, and audience engagement that structure fan labour. In this sense, both developers and fans are subject to the demands of platform economies, where discoverability and sustained attention are crucial to success. However, key differences remain. Developers typically retain control over intellectual property and have access to formalised routes of monetisation and recognition, whereas fan creators operate within more informal and precarious conditions, often without guaranteed compensation or acknowledgement. This comparison highlights both the shared constraints and the asymmetries that define the relationship between developers and orbital fandoms, reinforcing the need to understand fan labour within broader platformed production systems.

These examples underscore how orbital fandom operates across a range of practices and economies, producing meaning, connection, and value in ways that often elude traditional models of fan engagement. Whether through remix culture, gift economies, or platform-mediated expressions of devotion, orbital fandom complicates conventional hierarchies of value, ownership, and participation within videogame cultures.

3.5. Applying Theoretical Frameworks to Orbital Fandom

To further develop the concept of orbital fandom, this section draws on the theoretical foundations outlined in the previous chapter and applies them directly to the dynamics of fan participation discussed throughout this thesis. By reinterpreting existing frameworks through the lens of orbital fandom, it becomes possible to illuminate how familiar practices, such as textual poaching, spectatorship, and affective labour, manifest differently when fans operate one or more steps removed from the original game IP. The following sub-sections explore how these concepts take on new meanings within the context of orbital fan cultures.

3.5.1. Textual Poaching Becomes Orbital Remixing

A foundational influence on this thesis is Henry Jenkins' conceptualization of participatory culture. Jenkins (1992; 2006) argues that fans are not merely consumers of media but active participants in its production, circulation, and interpretation. His work reorients the analysis of media engagement by emphasizing the creative, collaborative, and often subversive practices of fan communities. Central to his theory is the notion of textual poaching, which describes the ways in which fans appropriate media texts for their own purposes, transforming and recontextualizing them in ways that often diverge from authorial intent or corporate control. Within gaming culture, such practices are manifested in Let's Plays, mods, machinima, memes, and fan fiction; forms of expression that extend the narrative and aesthetic life of games while constructing new meanings that reflect fan desires, identities, and politics.

Building on these insights, this thesis positions orbital fandoms as secondary ecosystems of meaning-making, distinct from but intrinsically linked to the source

games. These communities engage in interpretive and creative participation that is no less significant than play itself. However, whereas Jenkins' original framing of participatory culture emphasized the empowering dimensions of fan labour, this thesis interrogates its economic and structural entanglements. In platformed media environments, fan creativity is increasingly shaped by monetisation logics, algorithmic visibility, and proprietary governance structures. Thus, the analysis presented here situates participatory culture within the political economy of digital media, attending to both its expressive possibilities and its embeddedness in systems of value extraction and corporate control.

3.5.2. Spectatorship as Productive Participation

This thesis engages with developments in game studies that reconceptualize videogame engagement to include spectatorship as a primary form of participation. T. L. Taylor's work on live-streaming and esports, particularly in *Watch Me Play* (2018), is instrumental in this regard. Taylor challenges the player-centric paradigm of traditional game studies by demonstrating that watching games, particularly via Twitch and similar platforms, constitutes a socially embedded and culturally significant form of engagement. Her research shows how spectatorship is mediated through platform infrastructures, performer-audience dynamics, and real-time interaction, and how these practices constitute a distinct yet integral mode of gaming participation.

This thesis builds on Taylor's intervention by developing the concept of orbital fandoms as communities organized around mediated, affective, and performative encounters with gaming content. These fans engage through watching, commenting, curating, and contributing to discourses surrounding gameplay rather than playing games directly. Let's Plays, VTuber performances, and live streams are not merely auxiliary to gaming culture but are core to how games are experienced and interpreted. Viewers of these formats participate in complex social networks, forge affective attachments, and contribute to the cultural afterlife of games. Thus, this thesis reframes spectatorship as an active, socially situated, and labour-intensive form of engagement that is central to the contemporary configuration of gaming culture.

3.5.3. Fan Labour in Orbital Economies

The labour dimension of these practices is examined through the lens of digital labour theory. Drawing from Tiziana Terranova's concept of "free labour" (2012), this thesis interrogates the ways in which fan and creator labour contributes to the digital economy without adequate remuneration or recognition. Terranova conceptualizes the unpaid and often invisible labour of users as a foundational component of internet economies. In gaming fandoms, this labour encompasses streaming, content creation, moderation, community management, and promotional activity, each of which produces value for both platforms and game developers. The thesis engages further with Hector Postigo's work (2007; 2016), which details how fan labour is appropriated and regulated through corporate mechanisms that blur the lines between voluntary creative expression and structured exploitation.

The structure of digital labour in gaming fandoms is defined by informality, precarity, and asymmetrical control. While content creators may receive compensation through ad revenue, sponsorships, or donations, these income streams are mediated by platforms that impose regulatory frameworks and extract a significant share of the value produced. Moreover, much fan labour remains entirely unpaid, despite its essential role in sustaining the visibility and cultural relevance of games. The thesis argues that such labour, though often framed as passion-driven or intrinsically rewarding, is inseparable from broader capitalist logics of commodification and extraction. It examines how fan labour is incentivized, instrumentalized, and ultimately subordinated to the interests of developers and platforms, raising important questions about ownership, autonomy, and recognition.

3.5.4. Intensified Parasociality in Platformed Fandoms

A further dimension of this analysis concerns the affective economy of gaming fandoms, specifically the role of parasocial relationships in structuring fan engagement. Originally theorized by Horton and Wohl (1956), parasocial relationships describe the one-sided emotional attachments that audiences form with mediated personas. In the digital era, this framework has been expanded by scholars such as Wulf et al (2021), who analyse the ways in which influencers and content creators cultivate intimacy, relatability, and authenticity to attract and retain audiences. This thesis applies the concept of

parasociality to the context of gaming culture, where streamers, Let's Players, and VTubers function as central figures of fan attention and emotional investment. Parasocial relationships can influence fan behaviour. Fans who feel a strong connection with content creators may be more likely to engage in various forms of fan activities, including financial support (e.g., donations, subscriptions) and participatory actions (e.g., discussing the game, creating fan content). These behaviours can have implications for the videogame industry, as they can directly impact the success and sustainability of content creators and esports teams.

3.5.5. How Orbital Fans Navigate Visibility and Governance

Status and influence within fandoms are also shaped by economic and social capital. Fans who run a fan club or forum with a significant following may have more power within the fandom hierarchy as they have the ability to “speak” on behalf of the overall forum of fans. Alternatively, fans who have a direct line of communication or often collaborate with the subject of the fandom are also afforded power within the fandom hierarchy because of their interactions with the original videogame text holder. Finally, fans who invest heavily in a videogame franchise may become known and gain recognition and a degree of influence within a fandom owing to their financial commitment. When it comes to content creators the monetisation of fandom like this becomes quite easy with custom donations and “top donator” spots on a livestreamer’s channel for example (Recktenwald, 2016). Fans who invest a lot of time and effort into a fandom can often feel like they know the fandom better than the creator itself, venting displeasure if a videogame goes in a certain direction, they do not think it should as “antis” or anti-fans (Gray, 2003; Theodoropoulou & Gray, 2007; Harman & Jones, 2013). The difference between primary and the additional, second fan practices in this context is the text takes the form of a content creator themselves, which results in situations where fans are claiming to understand the personality of a person they have never met or interacted with beyond a computer monitor.

3.5.6. IPR as Enabler and Constraint in Fan Creativity

Incorporating an examination of intellectual property rights (IPR) into the research is highly significant when exploring fan-based labour within videogame fandoms. IPR

serves as a fundamental framework that defines the boundaries within which fan creativity operates. As articulated by Jenkins (2006), fans engage in multifaceted and innovative activities, ranging from fan art to derivative works, all of which are intricately tied to IPR regulations (Broussard, 2007).

This research benefits significantly from an analysis of how IPR influences and shapes the dynamics within these communities. By investigating IPR's impact, a deeper understanding of the power dynamics, relationships between various stakeholders, and the motivation of fan labourers is achieved. Fan fiction, as one prominent aspect of fan-based labour, can provide a valuable insight into how IPR can both enable and hinder creative expressions within videogame fandoms (Schwabach, 2016).

The interplay between fan creativity and IPR is a central theme in the context of fan-based labour. It is important to recognise that IPR can act as both a catalyst and a barrier, and it plays a pivotal role in shaping the landscape of fan activities (Hellekson, 2009; Hellekson & Busse, 2014). Including IPR in the research allows for a comprehensive exploration of the legal constraints, freedoms, and the intricacies of creativity, participation, and exploitation within videogame fandoms. Such an analysis can provide valuable insights into the experiences and behaviours of fan labourers, enriching the research with a nuanced understanding of this intricate domain (Broussard, 2007).

While intellectual property frameworks provide an important lens for understanding the constraints placed on fan creativity, they do not fully account for the conditions under which such creativity emerges and circulates. The findings of this thesis suggest that fan production is shaped not only by legal boundaries, but also by platform infrastructures, community norms, and affective investments. Platforms such as YouTube and Twitch play a central role in enabling and structuring creative practices through systems of visibility, recommendation, and monetisation. At the same time, community expectations and shared conventions influence what forms of content are considered acceptable, valuable, or recognisable within specific fandoms. Furthermore, participants' motivations are often driven by enjoyment, attachment, and social belonging rather than purely economic considerations. By integrating insights from participatory culture, spectatorship theory, digital labour, parasociality, and platform

studies, this thesis develops a comprehensive account of the cultural and economic dynamics that shape gaming fandoms in the digital era.

These factors suggest that fan creativity operates within a broader ecosystem that cannot be fully explained through intellectual property alone but must be understood as the outcome of interacting legal, technological, and social conditions. This broader perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how creativity is both constrained and enabled within orbital fandom. The framework not only illuminates the conditions under which fandoms operate but also exposes the structural inequalities and contested terrains that define their position within the contemporary media landscape.

3.6. Summary

The chapter situates the concept of orbital fandom as a critical intervention into the field. By theorising fan practices that orbit but are not directly tethered to primary game texts, the thesis foregrounds the importance of second-order cultural production and its implications for value circulation, creative autonomy, and platform governance. Together, these literatures establish a foundation for the empirical investigation that follows and frame the subsequent analysis of fan–developer relationships, stakeholder interviews, and thematic engagement across varied fan communities.

Chapter 4.

Methodology and Research Design

4.1. Introduction

Planning an appropriate research methodology in advance is crucial for ensuring the validity, reliability, and depth of findings in a study such as this thesis on videogame orbital fandoms. A well-designed methodology provides a structured framework for data collection and analysis, ensuring that the research questions are effectively addressed and that the study makes a meaningful contribution to both academic and industry debates. In the context of this project, methodological decisions were shaped by the need to capture the affective, relational, and structural dynamics of contemporary fan cultures, including the circulation of social, cultural, and monetary value.

This required a qualitative, multi-method approach. While methods such as virtual ethnography, stakeholder interviews, and auto-ethnography each offered potential insights, the final design combined a journaling study and a series of semi-structured interviews. The journaling study foregrounded the everyday rhythms of media consumption, while interviews captured the perspectives of diverse stakeholders including cosplayers, content creators, fanfiction writers, journalists, community organisers, and developers. This design balanced the micro-level detail of daily practice with the macro-level dynamics of creative labour and recognition.

By aligning these methods with the research objectives, the study was able to examine not only what fans and creators do, but how they make sense of their practices, the meanings they attach to them, and the ways in which they navigate platform infrastructures and industry structures. Careful planning was also necessary to address the ethical complexities of fan labour and intellectual property, particularly in cases involving sensitive practices such as sex work and parody production.

This chapter therefore outlines the methodological framework of the thesis. It explains the rationale for adopting a qualitative approach, details the data collection methods, describes the analytic strategies used, and reflects on ethical considerations

and limitations. By doing so, it provides the foundation for the thematic analyses that follow. The methodological choices in this thesis are designed to address the complexity of orbital fandom, which operates across everyday practices, creative production, and platformed economies. A qualitative approach was adopted because the research questions required depth of engagement with participants' experiences, rather than statistical generalisation. Orbital fandom is constituted through meanings, affective attachments, and flows of value that are not easily captured through survey instruments or large-scale quantitative measures.

The use of multiple methods was necessary to approach the phenomenon from different vantage points. The journaling study provided access to the rhythms of everyday content consumption, revealing the small-scale but cumulative practices through which fandom is reproduced. This approach aligns with existing fan studies scholarship that emphasises habitual engagement and affective labour as central to digital cultures. The stakeholder interviews offered insights from those positioned at the intersections of fandom, creativity, and industry, such as cosplayers, content creators, and developers. These voices were crucial for examining how recognition, labour, and value are negotiated across different roles. Finally, auto-ethnography was incorporated to acknowledge the researcher's embeddedness as an aca-fan and to provide reflexive awareness of how positionality shapes both data collection and interpretation.

This design reflects the need for a layered methodological strategy. By triangulating between participant-generated data, first-hand narratives, and reflexive self-observation, the thesis addresses its central research questions: what constitutes the value creation of orbital fandom, how value circulates within communities, and how such practices can inform more ethical engagements between fans, creators, and industry stakeholders.

4.2. Research Design and Rationale

The selection of research methods for this research design leans heavily towards qualitative approaches, notably virtual ethnography and related auto-ethnographic methods. These choices are grounded in their widespread acceptance and use within

the fields of game studies and fandom studies, which this research directly intersects. Prior studies employing similar methods have yielded high-quality outcomes, instilling confidence that these methods can yield comparable results for this research. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that ethnography and auto-ethnography have inherent limitations. Notably, the issue of bias looms large, especially in research centred on aca-fan researchers. Researchers must remain vigilant in recognising and addressing implicit biases throughout the research process to minimise their impact on the validity and reliability of the results.

Qualitative ethnographic methods are particularly invaluable for capturing nuanced understandings of intricate subjects like cultural phenomena. They offer a deeper level of comprehension that may not be attainable through purely quantitative approaches. While quantitative methods might provide supplementary data in specific case studies, they will not be the primary focus of this research.

Initially, the research plan included parallel analysis of qualitative results with quantitative data from the videogame industry, examining the financial transactions between companies and fans. Such analysis involved studying sales, marketing, and advertising data, obtained from videogame companies and third-party aggregate companies specialising in videogame industry research, such as Newzoo and App Annie. However, collecting quantitative data in the videogame industry presents several challenges. Companies are often reluctant to release extensive statistics, as it might provide a competitive advantage to rival developers. Moreover, access to statistics from industry analysis companies like Newzoo requires a substantial financial investment, exceeding the budget allocation of a typical PhD candidate.

Inductive coding is a qualitative data analysis method I used where codes and themes are generated directly from the data itself rather than being based on pre-existing theories or frameworks. It is an exploratory approach: I read through the data iteratively, identifies patterns, assigns descriptive codes, and gradually develops broader thematic categories grounded in participants' actual words, actions, and experiences. This process remains flexible and open-ended, allowing unexpected findings to emerge without imposing restrictive analytical models from the outset.

Furthermore, these third-party statistics companies do not transparently disclose their data collection methodologies, which raises concerns about the reliability of the statistics they produce. Therefore, the decision to deviate from primarily quantitative methods is partly financial, given the prohibitive cost of data acquisition. Additionally, feedback has emphasised the importance of exercising caution when utilising numbers from third-party statistics websites, especially when their data collection processes are not explicitly stated.

However, this shift away from quantitative data methods does not eliminate the possibility of using quantitative data entirely. Qualitative data can be gathered from the communities under investigation, focusing on their impact on the games and orbital content creators. While quantitative analysis remains a valuable tool for factor analysis and the examination of correlation variables, its utilisation demands careful consideration and the availability of appropriate datasets.

This research methodology is intended to provide comprehensive insights into the dynamics of secondary fan communities in the videogame industry and their multifaceted relationships with videogame content and developers. Through this approach, a rich and multifaceted understanding of these communities can be achieved.

Fan studies introduces a notable concept known as the “Aca-fan” or “fan scholar” (Hills, 2002), signifying academics who investigate their own fandoms or interests. As a researcher, I align with this “aca-fan” identity as I investigate fandoms of which I am a part and for which I hold a profound interest while maintaining a critical perspective. Investigating into the methods associated with the aca-fan and fan studies, ethnography and auto-ethnography emerge as recurring and widely employed approaches. The prevalence of these methods in the intersection of both fields, where my research is situated, strengthens my choice to employ these methods in my research.

As a researcher, I also identify as an orbital fan; what might be described as a fan of fans whose engagement with gaming culture is often mediated through content creators rather than direct gameplay. My interest in videogames is deeply shaped by sustained spectatorship of gaming YouTubers and other creators, positioning me within the very ecosystem under study. This perspective informs the research design by

aligning with the subjectivity of many participants and providing reflexive insight into the dynamics of fandoms formed at a distance from the primary game text.

In summary, the adoption of qualitative methods, particularly virtual ethnography, stakeholder interviews and elements of auto-ethnographic approaches, align with the interdisciplinary nature of this research. The limitations and complexities associated with quantitative methods, along with their high cost of implementation, advocate for a qualitative-centric approach, in line with the research's focus on understanding the complex interplay between game fans, communities, and videogame content creation.

4.2.1. Virtual Ethnography

Virtual ethnography is a specialised variant of ethnographic research introduced by Christine Hine in 2000, tailored for the investigation of online communities. The ascendancy of the internet and the burgeoning proliferation of online communities required a distinctive toolkit to examine and comprehend these digital domains. This is due to the inherent complexity of online communities, where the direct observation of participants is replaced by the scrutiny of their digital footprints and engagement in computer-mediated communication. Hine meticulously examined three fundamental aspects of conventional ethnography that she believed were ill-suited for investigating the early landscape of internet culture research: the role of physical travel and face-to-face interactions in ethnography, the interplay between text, technology, and reflexivity, and the construction of ethnographic subjects (Hine, 2000). This is also related to the term's online ethnography and "netnography", more specific types of online research within the broader scope of virtual ethnography.

Notably, the consideration of face-to-face interactions remains pivotal in the practice of virtual ethnography. It is imperative to recognise its significance in any virtual ethnographic research design. There exists a viable prospect of combining virtual and traditional ethnography into a hybrid methodology, involving an initial study of participants within their online communities, followed by potential engagement and face-to-face ethnographic interviews. While this hybrid approach has been undertaken previously (Wirman, 2011), practical constraints might limit its applicability, given the widespread reach of these online communities. Hine astutely contends that ethnographic methods furnish a nuanced comprehension of intricate subjects like culture, diverging

from the more reductionist tendencies of quantitative techniques (Hine, 2000). Given the emphasis on online cultures in my study, this affirms the rationale for adopting qualitative ethnographic methodologies over quantitative approaches.

4.2.2. Auto-Ethnography

In the quest to identify the most appropriate research methods for this study, a critical assessment of prevalent approaches within the academic domains of the research is indispensable. While ethnography and virtual ethnography were already under consideration in the initial research proposal, the concept of auto-ethnography, being relatively unexplored, necessitates more extensive inquiry to assess its suitability for the research objectives.

Auto-ethnography, as a research method, has found wide acceptance in the field of humanities, particularly in game studies, cultural studies, and related disciplines (Chang, 2016; Bochner & Ellis, 2001; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Goldschmidt, 1977). The method's origins date back to the 1970s when cultural researchers began to utilise auto-ethnography as a means to provide insights into their own cultures, facilitating “personal investments, interpretations, and analyses” (Goldschmidt, 1977). However, it is important to note that the classification of a work as auto-ethnography or ethnography largely depends on the claims made by the authors (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). In the context of this research, auto-ethnography holds potential utility, yet concerns about potential bias when the researcher becomes a participant in the study must be carefully addressed.

Auto-Ethnography is discussed in depth in Ashley Brown’s chapter titled “Awkward: The Importance of Reflexivity in Using Ethnographic Methods” (2015), included in the edited volume “Game Research Methods: An Overview” (Lankoski & Björk, 2015). This collection provides a broad introduction to methodological approaches suitable for different types of games research. Brown’s contribution focuses specifically on emotional complexities of conducting ethnographic research in the context of game studies. The author highlights the importance of reflexivity and emotional boundary management, cautioning that researchers may become overly emotionally involved with the participants if the boundaries are not thoughtfully maintained. Brown argues that both the researcher’s own comfort and that of the participants must be carefully considered

prior to entering the field. In the same volume, Chapter 8 by Jori Pitkänen titled “Studying Thoughts: Stimulated Recall as a Research Method”, explores the qualitative method of stimulated recall, in which participants recall their own actions from stimuli like audio or video recordings. Ethical considerations are highlighted, as this method requires participants to be recorded, which compromises their usual anonymity. Therefore, it is crucial to find participants willing to be identified in the research, as their recorded actions play a key role in the method. Alternatively, if a participant wishes to remain anonymous, the researcher should ensure that anonymisation is feasible, regardless of the recording method used.

To mitigate potential bias, the auto-ethnographic component of this study will be limited to supplementing data collected from the fans under investigation. Although auto-ethnography inherently entails some degree of bias, every effort will be made to minimise its impact on the research findings. Consequently, surveys and interviews distributed to other participants in the virtual-ethnographic segment of the study will be conducted meticulously to avoid introducing any unintended bias. In line with Espen Aarseth’s emphasis on researchers playing the games themselves as a means of understanding them fully, this study initially proposed the incorporation of content creation as a form of auto-ethnographic practice-based research. This approach parallels Aarseth’s argument that a researcher cannot provide a comprehensive analysis of a game without personally engaging with it. In a similar vein, it suggests that to truly comprehend orbital fan content and its role in fan communities, one must participate actively within these communities. This synthesis of virtual-ethnography, focused on studying online communities, and auto-ethnography, which investigates my own experiences within those groups, provides an in-depth and holistic understanding of the subject matter.

A notable precedent for this approach can be found in Emma Witkowski’s pioneering work, where she conducted an auto-ethnographic study by joining an esports team for her PhD thesis, one of the first major academic studies of esports players (Witkowski, 2012). Her research, which subsequently expanded to encompass qualitative methods for the study of esports team players in close proximity (Witkowski, 2018), laid the foundation for her prominent position in the field of esports research. While this research is inspired by Witkowski’s work, it focuses on distinct subjects.

Witkowski studied esports players, whereas this study examines orbital fans. Therefore, the research builds upon Witkowski's foundational work, introducing new insights in a different spectatorship area. Nevertheless, Witkowski's work raises the question of whether I should adopt the role of a content creator or an orbital fan within the auto-ethnographic component. While I already assume a passive role as an orbital fan, engaging with orbital fan content in my daily life, an opportunity exists to investigate into the relatively unfamiliar role of a content creator to complement the auto-ethnographic examination of the orbital fan perspective. This broader approach encompasses the study of interactions between content creators, orbital fandoms, and game intellectual properties (IPs). Notably, I have prior experience in videogame livestreaming and Let's Playing as a casual hobby, which could inform my auto-ethnographic investigation.

However, the use of livestreaming as a research tool raises ethical concerns, as evident in the paper 'The Unintended Consequences of Using Twitch as University Professor' by Ashley Brown (2019), who used Twitch as both a research tool and a teaching medium. Brown's experience highlighted the emergence of personal celebrity status and ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas include issues related to privacy, working hours, consent, and the potential for revealing participant data in a public forum. Consequently, this auto-ethnographic approach, involving livestreaming, may not be the most appropriate option due to the complexities surrounding its ethical implementation. Therefore, this study will not utilise auto-ethnography in a direct sense but rather focusing on my role as an aca-fan and orbital fan, without engaging in content creation as part of the project. I can also rely on my personal practice having participated within the online videogame content creation scene making Let's Play videos in 2008 and as a livestreamer in 2013-2014, while my experience was brief and I in no way had any kind of following or online popularity, the practice of participating in these creation systems did give me some brief insight into a historical snapshot of the early days of online videogame content creation. This decision ensures that ethical concerns are adequately addressed, making it more conducive to this research's goals. While content creation remains an intriguing avenue for future exploration, the current study emphasises a thorough understanding of orbital fandoms within the context of the broader research objectives. Based on the methodology choices my research plan was as follows. A simultaneous study of fans involving pre interview journaling and post interviews alongside stakeholder analysis. The second stage would then be stakeholder interviews

based on the aforementioned analysis. The third stage would be data analysis. The final stage would be combining conclusions and contributions from all stages to potentially answer the research questions.

4.3. Participant Recruitment

This study was approved by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University Human Subjects Ethics Application Review System (HSEARS), under application numbers HSEARS20200715003 and HSEARS20221011012. Informed consent was initially intended to be acquired through signed consent form, using a standard template provided by the University. However, once participant recruitment commences, it became evident that this approach was not always feasible.

Several stakeholders from the study presented in Chapter 5 expressed discomfort with signing documents that included the real name, particularly in cases where their role or perspective might be sensitive. To accommodate these concerns, alternative consent procedures were introduced. Participants were offered the option of providing oral consent at the beginning of a recorded interview, or written consent via an account or email address associated with their stakeholder role. While obtaining a signed consent form remained the preferred method for official documentation, these flexible approaches allowed for greater inclusivity and helped ensure the participation of individuals who might otherwise have declined due to concerns about identifiability.

4.3.1. Stakeholder Interview

A total of 15 participants were recruited for the stakeholder interviews that I describe in Chapter 5. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 50 and were primarily based in Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. Recruitment was carried out through a combination of personal networks, professional connections, and targeted outreach within relevant online communities. Participants were not selected to represent a statistically generalisable sample, but to reflect a range of positions within orbital fandom. This includes creators, organisers, industry-facing professionals, and highly engaged fans. The diversity of backgrounds, including differences in profession, geographic location, and forms of engagement, allows the study to examine how orbital

fandom operates across multiple roles and contexts rather than within a single community type. In qualitative media studies, especially with rich interviews and thick thematic coding, 15 is acceptable, especially when participants are diverse and strategically chosen (Hagarman & Wutich, 2007).

Table 1. Participants Information

Initial	Description	Age	Location	Pronouns
J	Extreme Videogame Enthusiast	35	UK	They/She
V	Content Creator and Sex Worker	33	Canada	He/They
T	Director of a Videogame	32	UK	He/Him
K	Fanfic Writer turned Game Designer	29	Hong Kong	She/Her
Y	Prop Hobbyist turned Professional	50	UK	He/Him
C	Tailor	29	Hong Kong	She/Her
H	Hololive Megafan	25	Hong Kong	He/Him
A	Videogame Journalist	45	UK	He/Him
O	Small Scale YouTuber	27	UK	She/Her
B	Tattoo Artist	28	Hong Kong	He/Him
I	Mobile Game Studio CEO	35	Hong Kong	He/Him
R	Indie Game Developer	32	Hong Kong	He/Him
E	Customer Support Agent	30	Hong Kong	He/Him
X	Livestreamer Fan	21	USA	He/Him
Q	Fan artist	24	UK	He/Him
G	Amateur streamer	22	Canada	She/Her
D	Vtuber Fan	24	USA	She/Her

4.3.2. Journaling Study

A total of 17 participants were recruited for the journaling study that I describe in Chapter 6. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 36 and were primarily based in United States the United Kingdom, and Hong Kong. Recruitment was conducted through online forums and discussion spaces, particularly those associated with videogame fandoms. The journaling study focused on participants' everyday engagement with platformed content, particularly through systems such as YouTube recommendations and subscription feeds. Participants are therefore positioned not only as viewers, but as users embedded within platform infrastructures that shape what they see, how they engage, and how value is perceived. This allowed the study to capture how value is

encountered and interpreted within platform-mediated environments rather than as isolated acts of consumption.

Recruitment was conducted through online forums and discussion spaces, particularly those associated with videogame fandoms such as subreddits related to YouTubers or Livestreamers. I made a deliberate decision to use public forum posts rather than direct outreach, in order to minimise potential biases introduced by targeted recruitment. Although I had long been an active participant in several of these communities, I opted to create new accounts specifically for research purposes. This allowed me to adopt a more neutral and semi-professional stance, avoiding the possible implications, whether favourable or not, that might be inferred from previous personal posts. At the same time, I was aware that using newly created or “blank” profiles could present me as an outsider. To address this, I was transparent about my role, openly acknowledging my position as both a researcher and a member of the fandom and explaining the rationale behind the use of new accounts.

Engaging participants through online forums presented several challenges and required a careful, respectful approach. Initial communication with forum moderators proved essential in building rapport and trust within each community. Verifying my identity as a fan researcher and communicating directly with moderators helped increase acceptance rates for recruitment posts, particularly in forums that are typically cautious about external links or off-site activities due to concerns around scams or malicious intent. To align with each forum’s expectations, I tailored my recruitment language and practices, accordingly, seeking to foster comfort and minimise disruption. When posting on Reddit, I took care not to over-post within the same subreddit in order to avoid disrupting conversations or irritating users. Some subreddits enforced minimum karma requirements, necessitating participation in broader Reddit communities to accumulate sufficient reputation before posting. This presented a tension between maintaining a professional researcher profile and conforming to platform-specific practices that were necessary for visibility.

Despite these efforts, I encountered several instances of shadow banning; a moderation tool that renders posts invisible to others without notifying the user. This typically occurred when accounts were flagged as suspicious due to their recent creation or the repetitive nature of posted content. While Reddit offers an appeals process, it is

often lengthy and unreliable. In practice, I resorted to creating new accounts as a more pragmatic solution, even though this cycle occasionally risked undermining the legitimacy and consistency of the research profile.

These experiences underscored the complexities of conducting ethical research in platformed environments, where researcher visibility, participant trust, and algorithmic governance intersect in unpredictable ways. Balancing professionalism, transparency, and community norms required continuous reflexivity and careful negotiation of my dual position as both an insider and an observer.

4.4. Data Collection

Data was collected in different methods depending on the study. For the participant journaling study data was collected via a secure google form that was shared with each participant individually. Participants were asked to complete the journaling exercise over a defined period of 10 days, recording their daily engagement with videogame-related content across platforms. The purpose of this activity was to capture routine, often overlooked patterns of engagement as they occurred, rather than relying solely on retrospective accounts. The 10-day period was chosen to capture a mix of weekdays and weekends to account for routine changes between them. Participants were motivated by a combination of interest in the study and reflection on their own viewing habits, with the journaling process enabling a more immediate and situated account of their interactions with platformed content.

The participant was then able to complete their daily journaling and return it to me each day at their own leisure. The only issue with this self-return system was that some participants forgot to return it on some days and some participants did not complete the full 10-day period. When that happened, I sent them a message with a gentle reminder to please return the next one. After the journaling was complete, I was easily able to export all the participants data as a file that was compatible with excel which I then used to break it down and separate into thematic coding.

Stakeholder interview data was collected in a variety of ways according to the preferences of each stakeholder. The most ideal interviews were conducted accompanied by an audio recording if in person or an audio/video recording if the

interview took place over the internet. After the interview, the audio data would be transcribed before a thematically coded for analysis of key themes.

To mitigate the risk of technical failures, I maintained hand-written notes during all stakeholder interviews as a precautionary redundancy. This approach proved effective when one interview recording was partially lost due to file corruption. The availability of detailed summary notes, alongside the option to re-contact the interviewee for clarification, ensured the integrity and completeness of the data.

Selected excerpts from the journals and stakeholder interviews are presented in the Appendices at the end of this thesis to illustrate the types of engagement captured prior to thematic analysis.

4.5. Data Analysis

While the methodology was planned out well in advance, some problems were encountered during the data collection phase. While a data set was eventually collected that could move forward to the data analysis phase, it is important to examine the issues faced during this type of online ethnographic methodology and the reasons for those failures or hardships in collecting data.

The data analysis proceeded through an iterative process of inductive coding and thematic refinement across both the stakeholder interviews and the participant journaling material. After transcription and collation, the data were first read repeatedly in full in order to establish familiarity with the tone, context, and recurring concerns expressed by participants. During this initial stage, open inductive codes were assigned to segments of data that appeared analytically significant, including references to recognition, creative labour, visibility, platform dependence, emotional attachment, monetisation, community belonging, and boundary management. These early codes were deliberately broad and descriptive so as not to impose a rigid framework onto the material too early in the analysis.

Once an initial coding pass had been completed, the codes were compared across participants and across the two datasets in order to identify overlaps, repetitions, and meaningful points of divergence. Related codes were then grouped into broader

thematic clusters, allowing patterns to emerge from the data itself rather than being fully predetermined by the literature. For example, codes relating to audience acknowledgement, developer feedback, institutional endorsement, and feelings of validation were brought together under the broader theme of recognition, while codes relating to upload routines, recommendation systems, discoverability, and algorithmic exposure informed the themes concerning platform dynamics, value circulation, and visibility.

This process was iterative rather than linear: themes were refined through repeated returns to the source data, with provisional groupings being adjusted, merged, or separated in response to new connections or inconsistencies. Particular attention was paid to how similar issues were experienced differently by stakeholders occupying different positions within orbital fandom, such as creators, organisers, journalists, and everyday viewers.

This process enabled the thesis to move from descriptive coding to analytically meaningful themes that both reflected the data and supported the broader conceptualisation of orbital fandom developed in the literature review. The final thematic structure was therefore developed through a comparative and reflexive reading of the material, balancing recurring patterns with important variations across roles, platforms, and forms of engagement.

4.6. Summary

This chapter has set out the methodological foundation of the thesis, detailing the research design, methods of data collection, strategies of analysis, and ethical considerations. At its core, the study adopted a qualitative approach because the questions under investigation, how value circulates in orbital fandoms, and how fans and creators experience labour, recognition, community, and visibility demand attention to lived experience, interpretation, and affect. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) observe, qualitative research is uniquely suited to exploring the meanings that participants attach to their practices, and to understanding social life in context. The methodological choices made in this project were therefore guided not only by feasibility but by epistemological fit: only through methods attentive to subjectivity and nuance could the complexity of fandom be adequately addressed.

The combination of a journaling study and semi-structured interviews proved particularly valuable in this respect. The journaling study captured the everyday rhythms of media engagement, moments that are often too mundane, habitual, or affectively fleeting to surface in interview recall. It revealed the textures of daily life: the ways participants relaxed with YouTube streams, navigated algorithmic recommendations, or used fandom to punctuate work and study routines. In contrast, the stakeholder interviews provided more sustained reflection on creative practices, community engagement, and professional trajectories. Here, participants articulated their investments in cosplay, fanfiction, game development, and other forms of labour, situating their work within broader structures of recognition and visibility. These two methods balanced micro- and macro-perspectives, showing how fandom is lived in daily practice while also embedded in longer-term identities and career paths.

The analysis of this material relied on thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), supported by cross-case matrices and reflexive memos. These strategies ensured that interpretation remained systematic and transparent while still grounded in participants' voices. As Charmaz (2014) argues in relation to constructivist grounded theory, reflexivity is not a threat to validity but a resource: by attending to the researcher's own position within fan and academic communities, the analysis acknowledges its co-constructed nature. This reflexive stance was especially important in a study where the researcher shares cultural proximity with participants, helping to mitigate assumptions while also allowing empathetic insight.

Ethical considerations were also central. Participants engaged in practices that ranged from mainstream fan activities to more sensitive areas such as sex work and adult parody. Ensuring confidentiality, respecting participant choices about pseudonymity, and avoiding sensationalism were all critical to maintaining trust. As Baym and Markham (2009) remind us, internet-related research often involves navigating blurred boundaries between public and private, professional and personal, and this study was no exception. By foregrounding ethical reflexivity, the project aimed to represent participants' voices respectfully while recognising the uneven power relations that shape academic inquiry.

Like all qualitative research, this study carries limitations. The sample size was necessarily modest, privileging depth over breadth. The journaling method relies on self-

report and may be subject to performance bias. Interviews capture subjective perspectives rather than statistically generalisable data. Yet these limitations should be seen as deliberate trade-offs rather than weaknesses. This study was also limited in addition to the relatively small sample size by the constraints imposed during data collection. Data collection was conducted during the COVID-19 period, which limited in-person access and shaped participant engagement, particularly increasing reliance on digital platforms.

However, the aim of the research is not statistical generalisation but analytical depth. By focusing on diverse participant positions and detailed qualitative accounts, the study prioritises insight into the dynamics of orbital fandom rather than representativeness across all fan populations. The geographic spread of participants introduces variation in cultural context, which enriches the analysis but also requires careful interpretation when identifying broader patterns. The analysis accounts for differences in cultural and geographic context by focusing on patterns of engagement rather than assuming uniform interpretation across participants. As Flyvbjerg (2006) argues, qualitative case-based research does not aim for universal generalisation but for “context-dependent knowledge,” which is precisely what is required to understand complex cultural phenomena such as fandom. The goal was never to speak for all fans, but to generate situated, nuanced accounts that illuminate how value circulates in specific contexts.

Overall, the methodological framework adopted here is well suited to the aims of the thesis. By combining journaling with interviews, and by applying thematic, comparative, and reflexive analytic strategies, the study is able to capture both the everyday and the exceptional, the intimate and the institutional. It demonstrates how methodological pluralism can enrich the study of fandom: journaling reveals how media consumption shapes daily life, while interviews illuminate how fan labour and recognition are navigated across diverse positionalities. The result is an empirical base capable of addressing the research questions in both breadth and depth, while also contributing to methodological debates in game and fan studies.

The following chapters build directly on this foundation. Chapter 5 turns to the stakeholder interviews, exploring five major themes; recognition, creative labour, community, platforms, emotional investment, and showing how fans and creators

describe their own practices and values. Chapter 6 complements this by presenting findings from the journaling study, shifting the focus to media consumption and the rhythms of daily engagement. Chapter 7 then integrates these perspectives, mapping the circulation of value across production and consumption, and positioning these findings within the wider theoretical framework of orbital fandoms. By setting out the rationale, procedures, and limitations of the study, this chapter has prepared the ground for the analyses that follow, ensuring that the empirical claims of the thesis rest on a transparent and robust methodological base.

Chapter 5.

Stakeholder Perspectives: Creative Labour, Recognition, and Community

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents a thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews conducted with individuals involved in diverse areas of videogame fandom and related creative industries. These stakeholders include cosplayers, YouTubers, game developers, fanfiction writers, fan organisers, journalists, and community managers, among others. Each interview provides valuable insights into the lived realities of participating in videogame cultures, particularly in relation to practices of creativity, labour, recognition, and community within the context of orbital fandoms.

Rather than approaching these interviews as isolated case studies, the chapter identifies key thematic intersections that emerge across the data. By synthesising individual experiences, the analysis aims to highlight the structural conditions, affective investments, and platformed dynamics that characterise participation in contemporary digital fandoms. Through this comparative lens, the chapter reveals both the shared trajectories and the distinct challenges faced by different kinds of fans and creators as they navigate the blurred boundaries between amateur and professional, personal and public, or expressive and monetised participation.

The structure of the chapter follows six primary themes that emerged through inductive coding: validation and recognition; creative labour and production; community and social support; boundaries, privacy, and identity management; platform dynamics and visibility; and emotional investment and personal fulfilment. These themes are not mutually exclusive but rather overlapping and often co-constitutive, reflecting the complex realities of fandom participation in digitally mediated environments.

Through this analysis, the chapter aims to elucidate how orbital fandoms operate as ecosystems of value, where fan practices are not only expressive but also socially embedded and economically implicated. The findings here provide empirical grounding

for the broader theoretical arguments advanced in this thesis and form the basis for the cross-comparative discussion that follows in subsequent chapters.

5.2. Background

The stakeholder interviews conducted for this thesis serve as a central component of its qualitative research methodology. They were designed to explore the lived experiences of individuals positioned at various points within the videogame fandom ecosystem, including fans, content creators, developers, community managers, and industry professionals. These interviews provide a textured and multi-perspectival understanding of how value is produced, circulated, and recognised within orbital fandoms; fandoms that exist at one or more degrees of separation from the original intellectual property.

The rationale for including these interviews stems from the need to ground the theoretical framework of orbital fandom in empirical evidence. While the existing literature in game studies and fan studies offers significant insights into participatory cultures and digital labour, there remains a gap in scholarship that connects these conceptual tools to the specific experiences of stakeholders operating within and around orbital fan practices. The interviews aim to fill this gap by offering accounts of everyday practices, challenges, and motivations related to fan production, recognition, platform governance, and affective labour.

Stakeholders were selected through a snowball sampling approach, beginning with accessible contacts within fan and industry networks and expanding through referrals and public callouts. The resulting sample includes participants from geographically and culturally diverse backgrounds, reflecting the globalised and digitally mediated nature of contemporary videogame fandoms. Care was taken to include a range of subject positions; amateur and professional, visible and anonymous, mainstream and marginal, so as to capture a representative cross-section of experiences across different sectors of fan involvement.

Each interview was semi-structured, allowing participants to narrate their engagement with fandom in their own terms while ensuring consistency across key themes. These themes were informed by the core concerns of the thesis: the role of platform infrastructures, the pursuit and avoidance of visibility, the tensions between

creative autonomy and professionalisation, and the emotional dynamics underpinning fan participation. The interviews also offered valuable insight into the participants' relationships with developers, content monetisation, social media dynamics, and parasocial interactions, all of which are critical to understanding value flow in orbital fan systems.

Together, the interviews provide the empirical foundation for the thematic analysis that follows. They illuminate the contradictions, aspirations, and affective investments of those embedded within platformed fan cultures and serve as a crucial lens through which the broader arguments of the thesis are developed.

5.3. The Procedure

The Stakeholder Interviews yielded a lot of extremely high-quality qualitative material; however the amount collected per Stakeholder varied as some were willing to give more time or go into more detail than others. After transcription, coding and thematic analysis many key themes and commonalities appeared between stakeholders from radically different areas of videogame fandoms. Each of the specific stakeholder's names have been abbreviated and anonymised and assigned a single letter for consistency among Stakeholders even if they consented to being publicly identified which is why certain information has been left in. Furthermore, the titles given to each interviewee is derived from the first question asked in every interview "Please introduce yourself and what you do in your own words." The interview reviews include meaningful quotes from the interviewee which I think highlights their unique perspective related to the specific theme being discussed.

5.4. Stakeholder Interview Case Reviews

This section presents a thematic synthesis of 15 stakeholder interviews conducted with individuals occupying diverse positions within videogame-related fandoms. Rather than reporting on each interview sequentially, the data has been organised according to six major themes identified through inductive coding: (1) Validation and Recognition; (2) Creative Labour and Production; (3) Community and Social Support; (4) Boundaries, Privacy, and Identity Management; (5) Platform Dynamics and Visibility; and (6)

Emotional Investment and Personal Fulfilment. These themes illuminate the multifaceted experiences of stakeholders engaged in creative, performative, and participatory fan practices, offering insight into the affective and cultural dynamics that characterise orbital videogame fandoms.

5.4.1. Validation and Recognition

Across the interviews, validation and recognition functioned as powerful motivators and affective anchors within stakeholder experiences. Recognition, whether from peers, audiences, or official game developers, often shaped how participants understood the value of their work and their place within the fandom ecosystem. Yet the sources, meanings, and consequences of such recognition varied considerably, revealing both shared desires and notable ambivalences.

For several interviewees, direct recognition from developers provided a rare and meaningful affirmation of their creative labour. Interviewee J, a cosplayer active since 2008, described the excitement of meeting developers and actors from Bioware while in costume:

“It was pretty exciting and validating, in about equal measure. To have the costume recognised and appreciated was really special ... talking to developers and performers about the things they love about the characters, stories, and game is always wonderful.”

Such encounters offered a unique sense of legitimacy, transforming a personal act of fandom into a publicly acknowledged creative gesture. Here, recognition functions as what Hills (2013) describes as cultural legitimization, a moment where fan practices are reclassified as socially meaningful through institutional acknowledgement. J’s emphasis on mutual conversation also indicates that validation was not solely one-directional; it emerged from a dialogic exchange in which fans and developers affirmed one another’s passion. This highlights how recognition circulates affectively within fandom, producing both validation and a sense of shared belonging.

For Interviewee Y, a hobbyist propmaker turned professional, recognition came in the form of commissions from developers:

“Sort of validates everything that you're doing. Like the actual people who work on the game asking you to make a real-world version of that. That means something.”

Here, recognition carried both symbolic and material value. Being commissioned to create official props transformed Y's unpaid, affective labour into compensated work, at least temporarily. This illustrates the precarious boundary between amateur and professional production, in which fan creativity can be reclassified as legitimate under certain conditions (Postigo, 2016). Yet Y also noted that this validation produced only minor increases in visibility and did not result in stable career progression. Such experiences echo Terranova's (2000) critique of digital labour: fan work is frequently harnessed by cultural industries, but the recognition extended rarely translates into lasting economic reward.

The ambivalence of institutional recognition was also felt by Interviewee C, a tailor selected to craft official cosplay for a promotional event. While their work was showcased on stage at a game company's annual event, they reported:

“We didn't receive direct comment from the developers. Logically they should've seen them ... but there was nothing personal or specific said.”

In this instance, the absence of acknowledgement is as significant as its presence elsewhere. C's reflections illustrate the structural asymmetry of power in fan–industry relations, where fans may contribute highly skilled labour that is incorporated into promotional spectacles yet remain personally invisible. Recognition here is withheld, revealing how institutional silence can produce disenchantment and deny fans the affective reciprocity they often seek. This tension foregrounds the limits of legitimacy when fan work is appropriated but not acknowledged.

Recognition also intersected with personal histories and emotional geographies. Interviewee A reflected on becoming a games journalist after years of participation in the fandom surrounding Metal Gear Online:

“After playing online together for a while our friendships moved into the real world ... I now work at the same magazine whose community I was once just a fan of.”

Their narrative represents a rare trajectory in which fandom translates directly into professional transformation. In this case, recognition exceeded validation to become

career-making, enabling A to move from a fan community into the institution it once revolved around. While such pathways are exceptional, they underscore the permeability of the boundary between fan and industry spheres and the capacity of recognition to reshape life trajectories. Yet even here, the movement was facilitated not only by talent but by networks of social capital cultivated within fandom, reaffirming the relational nature of recognition.

These accounts complicate the notion that recognition is unambiguously desirable or uniformly experienced. While developer acknowledgement can bring excitement, legitimacy, and even professionalisation, it can also be absent, unwanted, or carry unexpected costs. Importantly, several participants emphasised that peer recognition and appreciation from fellow fans was more meaningful than institutional attention. As Interviewee K reminded us, fan creativity often thrives best within the ecosystem of fandom itself, where affective connection and mutual understanding outweigh the prestige of official notice. This suggests that recognition must be understood relationally, as both a sought-after and resisted phenomenon, embedded within the uneven hierarchies of digital culture.

Recognition within orbital fandom may be best understood not as a singular outcome, but as an ongoing and uneven process shaped by platform infrastructures, audience engagement, and institutional visibility. Fan-produced content typically begins within small-scale circulation, shared among niche communities or limited audiences. From there, visibility may expand through platform mechanisms such as algorithmic recommendation, reposting, or amplification by more prominent creators. As content circulates, forms of social validation emerge through metrics such as views, likes, comments, and shares, which signal value within the platform environment. In some cases, this process may extend to institutional recognition, for example through acknowledgement or endorsement by developers, publishers, or official channels. However, this progression is neither linear nor guaranteed. Visibility may fluctuate, recognition may be short-lived, and many forms of contribution remain unacknowledged despite significant effort. Understanding recognition as a process rather than a fixed state therefore helps to explain how value is differentially experienced across participants, and why sustained visibility and reward remain uneven within orbital fandom. This process directly informs the dimension of Value Recognition in the

framework developed in Chapter 7, where recognition is conceptualised as a key stage in the circulation of value.

5.4.2. Creative Labour and Fan Production

Creative labour represents the central axis of engagement for the stakeholders interviewed in this study. Each participant, regardless of their professional or amateur status, described their involvement in various forms of fan-driven production: from cosplay, tailoring, prop-making, fan fiction, and indie game development to YouTube content and erotic parody performance. This labour was often unpaid or precariously compensated, yet richly meaningful. Across the interviews, fan labour emerges not only as a mode of expression, but as a means of world-building, identity formation, and community participation.

For many interviewees, creative output began as a personal passion that gradually evolved into public practice. Interviewee J traced their cosplay journey back to 2008, beginning with comic book characters and eventually moving into videogame cosplay. The process was both intimate and performative:

There's not only the sense of accomplishment and purpose in making a costume ... but also the feeling of just being a person again. People talked to me about the costume and the character and the game. That meant something.

Here, creative labour is explicitly tied to identity; cosplay becomes not only an act of creation, but one of reclamation and agency, particularly in relation to disability. The labour of making is also the labour of becoming, of asserting presence within a space often marked by exclusion.

Interviewee V provided a striking example of high-effort erotic parody production. Although their work might conventionally be dismissed as marginal or unserious, their account details a process that was rigorous, time-sensitive, and aesthetically ambitious:

I got the script a week before ... I had to rewrite the whole script and learn all the lines in a day. We researched the promotional materials for the game

to get the look and feel right in makeup, 'cause you know it's such a specific thing.

This account not only reframes erotic fan parody as a serious form of labour but also underscores the aesthetic fidelity and creative ambition underpinning such projects. V's labour straddles the domains of adult entertainment, gaming culture, and parody, resisting the binaries of mainstream/marginal or professional/amateur.

Interviewee T, as a game developer, engaged in a different mode of fan-informed labour. While their game was original, its uptake and dissemination were shaped by fan cultures. The visibility of the game on social media and its reinterpretation by fans, even though NSFW fan art of a cat character, revealed how quickly fan labour can attach to a creative work:

To know that people are enjoying it is a unique and special feeling ... seeing fan art within 24 hours of launch was surreal. Even the furies were on it.

This encounter illustrates how production and reception are mutually constitutive. T's labour is not only about making a game, but about navigating how that game is taken up, interpreted, and sometimes transformed by fan communities.

For Interviewee K, creative labour in the form of fan fiction served as a training ground for their eventual work as a professional narrative designer even if the work they do now is far removed from their original style of fanfiction:

With my job, it's so sort of far removed from what I like write about or what I draw, and I don't think even if I were to work in an official capacity with the fandoms that I was into ... my fan works wouldn't change in accordance to that.

Yet even as K's creative practice overlapped with their career, they chose to keep the two domains separate. This decision reflects an important tension: fan labour is valuable and generative, but its legitimacy within professional spaces is still fraught.

Interviewee C, a tailor, described transitioning from general fashion work to fandom-specific projects, eventually receiving a referral to craft cosplay for a videogame event. Their labour was precise, referential, and collaborative, relying on digital reference materials and close attention to fidelity:

The feedback was all about how closely the costumes resembled the official designs ... we even edited and shared reels documenting the entire process.

This suggests that fan labour often involves extensive skill and a keen sense of interpretation; not merely replicating visual assets but translating digital aesthetics into physical forms.

Interviewee Y's account provides another trajectory from fan labour to professional commissions. Originally a hobbyist, they began producing props and eventually reached out directly to developers, offering to build specific in-game items. This self-directed transition illustrates how fan labour can convert into freelance creative work:

I said I'd do anything for them, and they came back straight away and said yes. I built it and got to hand it over to myself. That was really cool.

Interviewee O offers a final, highly contemporary example of digital fan labour. As a YouTuber focused on indie games, their practice involved producing humorous and commentary-laden gameplay videos:

I say some stupid and funny comment now and then on video ... I love indie games and not many YouTubers in Hong Kong play them.

Their labour exists within platform economies where discoverability, algorithmic visibility, and niche appeal are crucial to sustainability. O's experience reveals the everyday affective rhythms of content production, where humour, performance, and community interaction coalesce. These accounts show that recognition in fandom is rarely straightforward: it can empower, disappoint, or destabilise, depending on the context. The ambivalence of recognition points directly to questions of labour, since the value of fan practices is often negotiated through the extent to which they are acknowledged by peers, audiences, or institutions. The following section turns to these issues of fan production and creative work in greater depth.

5.4.3. Community and Social Support

For many stakeholders in this study, videogame fandom was not only an arena of aesthetic production or identity exploration, but a foundational site of sociality. Across

interviews, participants described how fan communities provided emotional support, lasting friendships, creative collaboration, and a sense of belonging that extended well beyond the screen. Community emerged as a sustaining force, structuring experiences of fandom, shaping personal trajectories, and mediating access to opportunities, care, and recognition.

Interviewee A traced their entire professional trajectory in games journalism to their involvement in a gaming clan formed through a Facebook fan group for Official PlayStation Magazine:

“We started playing Metal Gear Online together ... then our friendships moved into the real world, where we met up for conventions, trips, holidays even a visit to the OPM offices. More than 15 years later, some of us are still in touch.”

Their narrative reveals a fandom that functioned not merely as a site of content consumption, but as a social infrastructure generating durable affective bonds. The “Rocket Minions” clan exemplifies what Bennett (2014) calls social fandom, where the communal interaction itself becomes central to the fan experience. Importantly, A’s story demonstrates how these infrastructures can become career-shaping, enabling him to parlay social capital accrued in fan spaces into professional journalism.

A similar sentiment was echoed by Interviewee Y, who had also been part of the Rocket Minions gaming clan:

“Maybe 10, 15 years of just me and us gaming, socialising, supporting each other ... it was a big part of my life. Not many of us meet up anymore, but it meant something then.”

Here, Y introduces the affective temporality of community, marked not only by solidarity but by eventual dissolution. Their narrative conveys both nostalgia and a recognition of loss, reminding us that fan groups are temporally bounded, vulnerable to attrition as life circumstances, relationships, and platforms change. This highlights the precariousness of fan sociality: while it can be deeply sustaining, it is also fragile, contingent, and subject to disbandment.

Interviewee O, a small-scale YouTuber, articulated a more intimate form of community sustained through digital infrastructure:

“I created a Discord server so sometimes I chat with them and game with them ... my best experience is after I took a long break and came back to streaming, some of my viewers were still here for me, and some even checked up on me to see how I was doing IRL.”

This example demonstrates how community is enacted not only through large-scale clans but also through small-scale creator–viewer networks. O’s account complicates one-dimensional understandings of parasociality by showing reciprocity: viewers do not simply consume content, but extend care back toward the creator. This indicates that even modest communities can carry substantial emotional weight, functioning as spaces of mutual support as well as entertainment.

Interviewee H, a self-identified “mega-fan” of Hololive VTubers, described participating in crowdfunding and fan-run celebration projects in Hong Kong:

“It’s a great thing that fans can come together and organise something to show their love ... sometimes the crowdfunding doesn’t even reach the target, and the organisers pay the rest out of their own pockets.”

H’s reflections illustrate the collectivist ethos underpinning much contemporary fandom, where fans mobilise resources to publicly demonstrate affection for their chosen idols. These practices resemble a gift economy, where value is produced and circulated without expectation of equivalent return (Mauss, 1990/2016). Yet the willingness of organisers to assume financial risk also points to the material pressures embedded in community participation, revealing how affective intensity can slide into exploitative self-sacrifice.

While some communities were event-based or clustered around specific properties, others were structured around creative projects. Interviewee C spoke of their experience working with models and photographers in the production of cosplay reels:

“We documented and edited a few reels highlighting the entire process and shared them on social media.”

Although not a conventional social group, this highlights the collaborative character of much fan labour. Communities often form through production itself, relying on shared vision and distributed expertise. This demonstrates how fandom blurs the line between community and co-production, with affective ties generated as much through collective making as through collective consumption.

Interviewee J reflected on the resilience and vulnerability of fan communities over time:

“I’ve seen fandoms rise and fall, social groups burn hot and fade away, and some endure ... online fandom community is a powerful presence against loneliness, isolation, and lack of purpose when physically limited by chronic illness.”

J’s testimony demonstrates the ways fandom can act as a critical resource for those navigating precarity, particularly disability and chronic illness. Here, online communities are positioned as infrastructures of care (Annett, 2014), countering the exclusion of everyday life by offering belonging, identity affirmation, and emotional sustenance. At the same time, the observation that communities can “burn hot and fade away” underscores their fragility and susceptibility to fragmentation.

Interviewee E, a former volunteer moderator turned community manager, offered a more instrumental perspective:

“Identify the passion of the players, convert and consider how they can be used or utilised ... distil the energy you get from fans into something useful.”

This framing underscores how community is simultaneously affective and extractive. For E, the role of the community manager involves channelling enthusiasm into labour: transforming players into testers, advocates, or brand ambassadors. This echoes critical accounts of digital labour (Terranova, 2000), in which the passion of users is systematically harnessed by industries. Yet E also noted that empathy could transform hostile interactions, with small gestures of kindness reshaping antagonistic players into cooperative participants. Community management thus oscillates between care and control, illustrating the ambivalence at the heart of platform-mediated fandom.

These trajectories underline how creative labour in fandom is both generative and precarious: a source of personal meaning and professional opportunity, yet also vulnerable to exploitation and instability. The labour of fans gains significance not only through what they make, but through the communities that sustain, circulate, and interpret their creations. The next section therefore explores how fandom operates as a site of community, belonging, and collective identity.

5.4.4. Boundaries, Privacy, and Identity Management

For many stakeholders, the experience of fandom necessitated not only creative expression but careful self-regulation. Across the interviews, participants spoke to the need to manage visibility, protect personal boundaries, and negotiate the complex interplay between their public and private selves. These negotiations were often shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, profession, platform dynamics, and socio-cultural stigma. In these accounts, the boundaries between fan and professional, public and private, visible and invisible are not stable but actively and continuously constructed.

One of the most explicit articulations of boundary management came from Interviewee K, a game designer who maintained a deliberate separation between their professional identity and their fan fiction persona:

I don't link my fan work to my professional identity ... there's a sort of thing where fans make fan works not for them to be seen by the official creators.

For K, anonymity within the fan space is not only about privacy but about protecting the creative freedom and communal specificity of fan practices. They referenced incidents where fan fiction was ridiculed by creators, such as in the case of Sherlock actors reading aloud and mocking explicit fan works mentioned in the interview, as a cautionary tale. Such examples underscore the asymmetric power relations between fans and industry figures, and the risks of unwanted exposure.

Interviewee O similarly articulated a resistance to being visually present on screen, choosing instead to voice content over gameplay:

I don't show my face mainly because I am shy ... and I don't wanna do makeup or dress up, cause I just wanna play games.

Their decision reflects more than a personal discomfort; it highlights the gendered pressures often placed upon female content creators in gaming spaces, where appearance becomes a site of judgement, surveillance, and expectation. O briefly experimented with a VTuber avatar, an anime-style digital persona designed to animate facial expressions through motion tracking, as a compromise that allowed for interaction without personal exposure.

In these examples, fans resist the commodification of their bodies and identities in a digital culture that privileges visibility. Their strategies resonate with Nakamura's (2015) account of "strategic invisibility," in which minoritised users manage how and where they appear in public online spaces.

Interviewee V, whose work as a sex worker and content creator intersected with game parody culture, described how their heavily tattooed appearance functioned as both a marker of personal identity and a barrier to mainstream casting:

I'm really heavily tattooed and it's really hard for me to get a role usually in mainstream porn ... but I fit the look for the Cyberpunk parody, so I got that role.

Here, bodily visibility is both an opportunity and a constraint. V's tattoos mark them as niche, an aesthetic specificity that precludes some roles but enables others. This underscores how embodiment and aesthetic codes shape access to fan and industry spaces, often in contradictory ways.

For Interviewee E, the boundary work was not about anonymity but about the responsibility entailed in crossing from fandom into fan-facing labour. As a volunteer moderator and later a professional community manager, they described navigating the shifting expectations that came with holding a semi-official position:

Conversion from fan to moderator ... trying to help the dev when you can ... but also knowing how to handle other people playing the game and your responsibility to them.

E's experience illustrates the complex positionality of "semi-professional" fan roles, typically voluntary, affectively motivated, yet structurally undercompensated and increasingly burdened with responsibility. Their labour involves emotional regulation, mediation, and performance, all while remaining legible to both fans and developers.

Interviewee C, who created cosplay professionally for a game event, described tensions not in their identity presentation but in the process of translating designs into wearable garments:

Some of the measurements we received might not have been accurate ... we anticipated this and made several parts adjustable.

Although C does not directly address visibility or self-management, their account still illustrates a boundary negotiation: between artistic vision and practical constraints, between the designer's intentions and the performative demands of cosplay-as-spectacle. Their use of adjustable costume elements is both a technical solution and a metaphor for the flexibility often required in fan–professional engagements.

Interviewee J offers a distinct but resonant reflection on embodied identity and public presence. As a disabled fan, they described how cosplay allowed them to shift public attention from their wheelchair to their creative work:

People talked to me about the costume and the character and the game.
Only one person stopped me to talk about the wheelchair ... I loved being
a cosplayer again, not a disabled person or a wheelchair advertisement.
That...is more powerful than people think

J's statement powerfully reframes visibility not merely as exposure, but as agency: the ability to choose what is seen and on what terms. For J, cosplay offered not just artistic expression, but a form of social recognition grounded in craft and character, rather than bodily difference.

The diverse accounts of community highlight how fandom can provide infrastructure for care, recognition, and collaboration, while remaining fragile and subject to dissolution. This duality points to the importance of examining how digital platforms mediate these communal forms, shaping their visibility, sustainability, and affective dynamics. The following section focuses on the role of platforms in structuring fan engagement.

5.4.5. Platform Dynamics and Visibility

In contemporary fan cultures, platforms are not merely passive spaces for content distribution but active agents in shaping how fan labour is made visible, interpreted, and rewarded. For the stakeholders in this study, digital platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Discord, Reddit, and Instagram were central to their fan practices, yet they were also sources of friction, unpredictability, and structural constraint. Participants described an ambivalent relationship to visibility: while it was often a goal, it was rarely straightforward or uniformly empowering. Platform architectures, audience dynamics, and algorithmic logics shaped who got seen, when, and how.

Interviewee T, an indie game director, provided one of the most vivid examples of platform-enabled virality. After posting a short development clip on Twitter, their game was rapidly disseminated, being liked over 200,000 times and receiving engagement from major industry figures:

“The game going viral was surreal ... it got retweeted by Markus Persson and Charlie Brooker ... but 4,000 new followers didn’t change how I felt about the work. Meeting someone at a con who loved the game did.”

T’s experience illustrates the volatility of digital visibility: numerical metrics, no matter how spectacular, do not necessarily correspond to deeper affective connection. This echoes Marwick’s (2013) observation that online fame can feel hollow when not matched by meaningful social ties. For T, face-to-face fan encounters provided a form of validation that platform virality could not, highlighting the gap between algorithmic amplification and embodied recognition.

Interviewee Y similarly described the fleeting and inconsistent returns of platform visibility. Despite having their prop work featured in gaming publications and even receiving official commissions from developers, the quantitative results were modest:

“I saw a little bump, but not as much as I’d have liked ... it just didn’t translate into a long-term following.”

Y’s account underscores the disconnect between cultural legitimacy and algorithmic valuation. Even when industries bestow recognition, platforms may not reward it with sustained visibility. This reflects Gillespie’s (2018) analysis of platform logics, in which attention is governed less by quality or legitimacy than by opaque algorithmic priorities.

Interviewee C reported a similar experience. After creating cosplay for a major promotional event, they documented the process through Instagram reels and stories:

“We did a few edited reels ... saw a modest increase in followers, though it wasn’t overly significant.”

Despite platform-optimised content, visibility remained short-lived. This illustrates the structural bias of platforms toward novelty, spectacle, and trending aesthetics (Bishop, 2019), which often disadvantage labour-intensive crafts or niche interests. For creators like C, sustained recognition is undermined by the churn of algorithmic feeds.

By contrast, Interviewee V experienced a dramatic spike in visibility following the release of a Cyberpunk 2077 erotic parody. Their Twitter following increased by over 20,000, and fans even created a Reddit community dedicated to them:

“It was shocking. I never thought it would blow up like that ... someone even made a Reddit page for me.”

Here, virality is linked to the spectacular and controversial. V’s tattoos and erotic performance marked them as distinctive, amplifying their visibility within the logics of internet sensationalism. Yet as Paasonen (2018) argues, sexualised visibility is ambivalent: it produces attention but also exposes performers to moral scrutiny and precarity. V’s case demonstrates how platforms often reward extremity and spectacle, while sidelining sustainability and craft.

Interviewee O offered a different perspective, deliberately avoiding major platforms in favour of more intimate spaces:

“I created a Discord server so sometimes I chat with [fans] and game with them ... I tried doing VTuber stuff briefly, but I still prefer just talking with people in private spaces.”

O’s account highlights a refusal of algorithmic scale in favour of relational depth. While YouTube and Twitter promise exposure, they also impose pressures of constant performance and volatile metrics. Discord enabled O to cultivate a smaller but more reciprocal community, echoing Baym’s (2018) argument that intimacy and authenticity often flourish in semi-private spaces rather than mass-audience platforms.

Interviewee E, who worked as a community manager and social media liaison, offered a perspective from within industry structures:

“Fans can become testers or moderators if you identify their passion ... distil the energy you get from fans into something useful.”

Here, visibility is framed not as personal recognition but as institutional resource. Fan practices on platforms are monitored, extracted, and operationalised into feedback loops. This reflects Jenkins, Ford, and Green’s (2013) notion of spreadable media, where user activity is systematically channelled into industry interests. Yet E’s reflections also highlight the role of human mediation, empathy and communication, showing how industry actors selectively transform fan energy into productive outputs.

Finally, Interviewee K highlighted another critical aspect of platform dynamics: the risks of surveillance. They deliberately avoided connecting their fanfiction writing to their professional identity as a game designer:

“I don’t have any traces of my social media directly tied to my fan works ... I just want to keep those worlds separate.”

K’s strategic compartmentalisation demonstrates how visibility is not inherently empowering; it can expose fans to ridicule, copyright policing, or unwanted industry scrutiny. This echoes Boyd’s (2014) discussion of “context collapse,” where the convergence of audiences destabilises the separation between personal, professional, and fannish selves. For K, concealment becomes a form of agency, allowing them to preserve creative freedom while managing reputational risk.

Together, these narratives reveal platforms as both enabling and constraining forces: they amplify content, but also impose logics of novelty, spectacle, and instability. For fans and creators alike, visibility becomes a resource that is contested, conditional, and unevenly distributed. These platform dynamics cannot be understood in isolation, however, as they are deeply entangled with the affective investments that underpin all forms of fan practice. The final section turns to these emotional dimensions directly.

5.4.6. Emotional Investment and Personal Fulfilment

Beneath the structures of visibility, labour, and community lies an often less theorised but profoundly significant dimension of fan engagement: emotional investment. For the stakeholders interviewed in this study, fandom was not merely an entertainment preference or a form of cultural production; it was also a site of emotional resonance, existential significance, and personal transformation. Their accounts reveal that fan practices often operate as affective lifelines, enabling forms of self-understanding, social resilience, and therapeutic identification that traditional institutional contexts fail to provide.

Interviewee J, a veteran cosplayer, offered one of the most powerful articulations of fandom as emotional sanctuary. Living with a disability, they described how cosplay allowed them to be seen not as a wheelchair user, but as an artist, performer, and fan:

“People talked to me about the costume and the character and the game ... not the wheelchair. I loved being a cosplayer again, not a disabled person or a wheelchair advertisement.”

This statement reflects not only the joy of performance but also a politics of visibility. Through cosplay, J was able to recast how they were perceived, resisting everyday ableism by redirecting attention from disability to artistry. Their reflection on convention spaces as moments of wholeness and inclusion underscores how fandom can function as what McRuer (2006) describes as a counter-hegemonic space of embodiment, where disabled identities are reimagined on more empowering terms.

Interviewee K similarly framed their fandom practices as personally transformative. Their decision to tattoo a phrase from *Disco Elysium* onto their body was emblematic of the game’s profound resonance:

“The game was very meaningful to me ... it was personal. I wanted to get it, so I got it.”

Here, affective attachment becomes materially inscribed on the body. Tattoos collapse the distinction between fiction and life, embedding narrative worlds into lived identity. This illustrates Grossberg’s (1992) concept of affective investment in popular culture, where media texts become constitutive resources for meaning making, extending beyond the symbolic into the embodied and existential.

Interviewee A recalled the final session of *Metal Gear Online* before server shutdown, a poignant ritual of digital farewell:

“We all gathered around as a group, then used the special code to make our characters sing the ending theme ... saluting together. It really was the perfect send-off.”

This moment exemplifies fandom as a site of collective ritual and temporal anchoring. The shutdown marked not just the end of a game but the closure of a shared social world. As de Kosnik (2016) suggests, fandom archives affective memory, and here the ritualised performance of a farewell becomes a communal act of mourning and remembrance.

Interviewee O described a more intimate but equally moving encounter with their fanbase after returning from a long hiatus:

“Some of [my viewers] were still here for me ... some even checked up on me to see how I was doing IRL. That moment really meant something.”

This illustrates how parasociality can evolve into reciprocity. Viewers became not just consumers of O’s content but caretakers of the creator themselves. This challenges reductive accounts of parasocial relationships as inherently one-sided (Horton & Wohl, 1956), instead showing how digital fandom can generate forms of mutual care and resilience.

Interviewee H found emotional resonance in collective initiatives within the Hololive fandom:

“Participating in real-life events with other fans was a blast ... watching fans organise things just to show their appreciation is impressive and meaningful.”

Here, large-scale fan rituals such as crowdfunded birthday celebrations function as affective public events. They blend personal joy with collective labour, echoing Baym’s (2018) argument that fandom often produces forms of relational labour where emotional connection and community building are inseparable.

Even Interviewee V, whose work involved professional erotic performance, emphasised the emotional dimension of recognition. Their parody of *Cyberpunk 2077* unexpectedly elicited acknowledgement from the game’s developers:

“It’s funny... because the majority of parody porn usually just went under the radar, you know? ... Developers or people who actually make the actual thing just don’t really care much.”

This account challenges the assumption that erotic fan labour is purely transactional. V’s surprise at receiving institutional acknowledgement underscores how even within commodified or marginalised forms of production, moments of validation can resonate affectively. It reflects Paasonen’s (2018) insight that sexualised media labour is entangled with humour, vulnerability, and affective intensity, not reducible to economic calculation alone.

Interviewee E, reflecting on their time as a volunteer moderator and later community liaison, noted how small gestures of empathy could reframe hostile interactions:

“How easy it is for a fan to change their behaviour based on a little bit of kindness ... someone leaves a rude comment, and if you reply earnestly, they come around.”

This illustrates the importance of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) in sustaining fan ecosystems. While often invisible and uncompensated, such practices of patience, empathy, and relational repair are central to maintaining social cohesion in digital spaces. E’s reflections highlight how even minor acts of kindness can transform antagonism into connection, underscoring the fragile but powerful role of affect in community life.

Across interviews, emotional investment emerges as the connective tissue binding together recognition, labour, community, and platforms. Fandom is not only a cultural practice but an affective lifeline, sustaining participants through creativity, sociality, and care. This affective surplus persists even when structures shift or communities dissolve, underscoring the resilience of fan attachment. These findings provide the basis for the transition to Chapter 6, which shifts focus from stakeholder accounts to everyday media consumption, tracing how fans integrate these emotional and cultural investments into the rhythms of daily life.

5.5. Summary

The interviews presented in this chapter provide an empirically grounded account of how videogame fandoms operate as sites of creativity, sociality, recognition, and affect. While each participant entered fandom from a different background and enacted their engagement through distinct practices, their stories reveal recurring patterns and tensions that illuminate the broader logics of *orbital fandoms*. These logics centre on how value circulates through fan cultures: how creative labour is legitimised, how communities provide infrastructures of care and collaboration, how platforms mediate visibility, and how emotional investments sustain participation even in the face of precarity. By examining these processes together, the chapter demonstrates that videogame fandom is neither a purely expressive realm of passion nor a simple pipeline into professional production, but a complex ecology where affect, labour, and power intersect.

A first theme to emerge was that of validation and recognition, which functioned as powerful motivators but also as sources of ambivalence. For several participants, moments of acknowledgement from developers or industry actors elevated their practices beyond the personal into the public, transforming acts of fandom into forms of cultural legitimacy. Interviewee J's reflections on the excitement of having their Bioware-inspired costume recognised exemplify how recognition can reframe fan labour as socially significant rather than marginal. Similarly, Interviewee Y described how being commissioned by developers to produce physical props "validated everything" they were doing, collapsing the distinction between amateur hobby and professional labour. Yet these examples also underscore the instability of institutional validation: fleeting commissions or viral moments rarely translated into sustained visibility or stable careers. Interviewee C's account of producing official costumes without receiving direct acknowledgement highlighted how institutional silence can undermine the affective reciprocity fans often seek. For others, such as Interviewee K, recognition was actively resisted, as the risk of being misunderstood or mocked by industry figures outweighed any prestige. These accounts illustrate that recognition within fandom is relational, contingent, and unevenly distributed. While external validation can bring excitement and legitimacy, peer recognition within fan communities was often described as more meaningful, suggesting that the most durable forms of value are generated within fandom itself.

A second theme concerned creative labour and fan production, which emerged as the central axis of engagement across all participants. Whether expressed through cosplay, tailoring, prop-making, fanfiction, erotic parody, YouTube content, or game development, fan labour was consistently described as meaningful, generative, and affectively charged. Interviewee J articulated cosplay as both performance and personal reclamation, enabling them to assert an identity beyond their disability. Interviewee V detailed the rigour of producing an erotic parody of *Cyberpunk 2077*, challenging assumptions that such work is unserious or marginal by emphasising its aesthetic ambition and professional discipline. Interviewee T described how fan labour attached itself to their indie game immediately after launch, demonstrating the mutually constitutive relationship between production and reception. Interviewee K reflected on the formative role of fanfiction in developing their narrative design skills, even as they maintained boundaries between amateur and professional writing. Tailors and

propmakers like Interviewees C and Y illustrated the precision and interpretive skill involved in translating digital aesthetics into physical artefacts. Finally, Interviewee O highlighted how digital fan labour, in the form of gameplay videos and commentary, requires humour, performance, and navigation of platform algorithms. Together, these accounts underscore that fan labour is not reducible to hobbyist activity. It is a form of cultural production that is deeply entwined with identity, aspiration, and community, while simultaneously precarious and unevenly valued.

The theme of community and belonging further illuminated the social infrastructures that sustain fandom. Interviewees repeatedly emphasised that fan practices are rarely solitary; they are embedded in collaborative, affective, and enduring relationships. Interviewee A traced their career in games journalism back to friendships formed in the “Rocket Minions” clan on *Metal Gear Online*, showing how fandom can generate durable social capital that extends into professional life. Interviewee Y described the same group as a formative space of sociality and support, even as it eventually dissolved, highlighting both the durability and fragility of fan communities. Interviewee O’s intimate Discord-based community revealed how small-scale networks can provide care and reciprocity, complicating the notion of parasocial relationships as entirely one-sided. Interviewee H emphasised the collective joy of participating in Hololive fan events, which mobilised crowdfunding and gift economies to celebrate virtual idols. For Interviewee J, online fandom offered vital resilience against isolation caused by chronic illness, providing a sense of purpose and connection otherwise unavailable. Interviewee E reflected on their experiences as a moderator and community manager, underscoring both the care and the extraction involved in managing fan communities. These accounts together show that fandom is as much about community as it is about content. It provides infrastructures of belonging, care, and collaboration, but these communities remain vulnerable to decline, uneven labour, and exploitation.

A fourth theme centred on platforms and visibility, which shaped participants’ practices in both enabling and constraining ways. Platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Discord, and Reddit were essential infrastructures for fan labour, but they were also sources of frustration and precarity. Interviewee T’s account of their game going viral on Twitter highlighted the volatility of digital fame, where thousands of new followers did not equate to deeper affective connection. Interviewees Y and C similarly

described how platform-optimised posts produced only modest gains, underscoring the opacity and inconsistency of algorithmic value. By contrast, Interviewee V experienced dramatic visibility through the viral circulation of their parody work, gaining tens of thousands of followers, though this visibility was entangled with the precarious logics of sexualised spectacle. Interviewee O deliberately avoided large-scale platforms, preferring the intimacy of Discord communities that aligned with their desire for authenticity. Interviewee E, operating from within industry structures, reframed visibility as an extractive resource, with fan activity on platforms harnessed as feedback and promotion. Interviewee K, meanwhile, deliberately concealed their fanfiction practices from professional networks, highlighting the risks of surveillance and context collapse in online spaces. Collectively, these accounts demonstrate that visibility is not a straightforward good but a contested and conditional resource. Platforms distribute attention unevenly, reward spectacle over craft, and impose pressures of performance and instability that many participants found alienating.

Finally, beneath these structures lay the theme of emotional investment, which anchored all forms of participation. For Interviewee J, cosplay provided a way to be seen not as disabled but as a cosplayer, reconstituting their identity in empowering ways. For Interviewee K, tattooing a phrase from *Disco Elysium* onto their body embodied the affective intensity of gaming narratives. For Interviewee A, the final ritual of *Metal Gear Online* before server shutdown illustrated fandom as a site of mourning and memory. For Interviewee O, the persistence of fans who checked on them during a hiatus demonstrated that parasocial connections could evolve into mutual care. For Interviewee H, Hololive fan events offered joy and belonging, while for Interviewee V, even erotic parody elicited moments of unexpected recognition that exceeded the transactional. Interviewee E's reflections on kindness as a moderating tool revealed the centrality of emotional labour in sustaining communities. Across these accounts, fandom emerges as an affective lifeline: a terrain where joy, care, resilience, and existential meaning are generated. Emotional investment, as Grossberg (1992) argued, is not incidental but constitutive of cultural participation, shaping how individuals attach themselves to media and to one another.

To summarise, these five themes; recognition, creative labour, community, platforms, and emotional investment, reveal the multidimensional character of

videogame fandoms. They demonstrate that fan practices are simultaneously expressive and precarious, empowering and extractive, fleeting and transformative. Importantly, they also illustrate the circulation of value within *orbital fandoms*: value is generated through labour, anchored by emotion, legitimised through recognition, sustained by community, and mediated by platforms. Yet this circulation is uneven, contingent, and often ambivalent, producing both opportunities and vulnerabilities.

By foregrounding stakeholder perspectives, this chapter has provided an empirical foundation for the thesis's broader theoretical claims. It shows that fandom is not only a cultural practice but also a social and affective infrastructure that sustains individuals and communities in ways that traditional institutions often do not. The following chapter builds on this foundation by shifting focus from stakeholders to audiences themselves. Chapter 6 explores how fans integrate videogame-related media consumption into their daily routines, examining the rhythms, motivations, and affective investments that structure fan life in practice. By tracing these everyday engagements, the analysis extends the argument that fandom is best understood as a set of practices in which affect, labour, and value circulate across multiple scales of life, from the routine to the spectacular.

Chapter 6.

Everyday Engagements: Media Consumption and the Rhythms of Fan Life

6.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of a journaling study conducted to investigate how everyday fans engage with videogame-related media across their daily routines. While the previous chapters focused on creators and industry-adjacent stakeholders, this study shifts the analytic lens toward the audience, capturing the practices and motivations of individuals situated within the broader fanbase. By centring participants who do not produce content themselves but are actively embedded in fan media consumption, the chapter provides a grounded, participant-centred perspective on how orbital fandom functions at the level of habitual engagement.

Participants were invited to record their daily interactions with videogame content over a defined period, noting what they watched, why it appealed to them, and what emotional or cognitive responses it evoked. This method enabled the identification of behavioural and affective patterns, including platform preferences, algorithmic influence, and temporal rhythms of viewing. The journals also offered insight into how fans navigate parasocial relationships, personalised recommendations, and the emotional contours of sustained media attachment.

The chapter begins by situating the journaling method within broader methodological traditions of virtual ethnography and audience research. It then outlines the key themes that emerged from participant submissions, including algorithmic curation, content scheduling, emotional resonance, and the shifting boundaries between entertainment, learning, and social connection. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of YouTube as a structuring platform, where algorithmic visibility, creator consistency, and platform logics shape the terms of fan engagement.

In documenting how fans relate to and experience videogame content as part of their everyday lives, this chapter contributes to a more comprehensive account of orbital fandom. It foregrounds the habitual, affective, and infrastructural dimensions of fan practice that are often overlooked in analyses of creative labour or professionalised content production. When read alongside the stakeholder interviews, these findings deepen the thesis's account of value, visibility, and community formation across the videogame fandom ecosystem.

6.2. Background

The journaling study was developed as a qualitative method to investigate the everyday viewing habits and emotional rhythms of videogame content spectators. Positioned alongside the stakeholder interviews presented in Chapter 5, it offers a complementary perspective by shifting analytical focus from creators and industry-adjacent participants to everyday fans and media consumers. By inviting participants to document their daily encounters with videogame-related media, the study aimed to illuminate the routine and often affective engagements that constitute orbital fandom at the level of practice rather than production.

The methodological foundation for this approach draws on media ethnography and affect theory, particularly studies that foreground the temporal, embodied, and habitual dimensions of media consumption. The journaling format was adapted from Kristine Jørgensen's work on game aesthetics and affective player response (Jørgensen, 2016), in which participants reflected on their gameplay experiences over time. In this study, the method was recalibrated to suit the context of spectatorship, asking participants not only to record what they watched, but also to reflect on their motivations, emotional responses, and the meanings derived from those encounters.

This method was selected for its capacity to access underexamined dimensions of fan life; particularly those that resist quantification or surface-level interpretation. The decision to employ self-reflective journaling was also informed by ethical and logistical considerations. Unlike real-time observation or surveillance-based methods, journaling affords participants greater agency over disclosure, allowing them to reflect at their own pace and determine the depth of personal detail shared. This was especially significant

given the intimate and occasionally private nature of parasocial engagement, platformed identity, and algorithmically curated media consumption.

Participants were recruited across a range of engagement levels, from casual viewers to dedicated fans of specific creators, franchises, or genres. Recruitment was conducted through digital fan communities, primarily Reddit and Discord, associated with videogame content creators, as well as through campus-based outreach targeting students interested in games. These decentralised platforms were prioritised as key infrastructural sites where orbital fandoms are formed, negotiated, and sustained. While the sample size remained modest due to the time-intensive nature of daily journaling, the resulting dataset captured a wide spectrum of experiences, offering insight into how fans navigate affective attachments, content preferences, and platformed routines.

Ultimately, the journaling study serves as a vital component of this thesis's methodological triangulation, enabling a grounded exploration of how orbital fandoms are lived, felt, and reproduced through daily digital practices. It highlights micro-level interactions and personal choices that, over time, contribute to broader patterns of fan engagement and cultural value production; dimensions often overlooked in research focused solely on creators or industry stakeholders.

6.3. The Procedure

Preliminary data collection played a crucial role in refining the research design for the journaling study. An initial pilot demonstrated that the original proposal, a nine-day journaling period encompassing two weekends and five weekdays, was overly demanding for participants. Many failed to complete the full cycle or discontinued midway. This highlighted the importance of prioritising the collection of usable data over adhering to idealised procedural expectations.

The pilot group, recruited informally on a voluntary basis, frequently submitted brief or incomplete entries. These often consisted of single words or short phrases, rather than the detailed reflections anticipated. Consequently, the most valuable data from this phase emerged through follow-up interviews. This outcome aligns with challenges documented in the source method. In her work on Games and Transgressive Aesthetics, Jørgensen (2016) encountered similar issues regarding participant

consistency and engagement. Reflecting on this in a subsequent methodological report, Pacholczyk (2017) noted that participant selection and motivation were critical factors in the success of the journaling format. This experience emphasised the importance of not only recruiting appropriate participants but also framing their role in ways that stress the value of their contributions. Communicating that their insights contribute meaningfully to research outcomes can be a motivating factor, particularly for those without prior academic involvement.

Once the refined group of participants had been selected, the updated protocol was communicated through short introductory interviews. Following this, the data collection period commenced. Upon receipt, the journal submissions were systematically transcribed into a central Excel spreadsheet, which served as the primary data repository.

During the first round of data review, a notable pattern emerged in the games being featured by the content creators' participants reported watching. A large proportion of the content involved horror titles, including several older and relatively obscure games. While horror is a common genre among variety streamers, its prominence in this dataset was especially pronounced.

Closer examination revealed a likely cause: the data collection had taken place in the final week of October, just prior to Halloween. Variety streamers often align their content with seasonal events to capitalise on thematic interest and audience engagement. The horror game trend was therefore interpreted as a strategic content decision by creators, designed to amplify novelty, increase reactions, and tap into seasonal fan attention. This practice also explained the recurrence of older titles, whose return during Halloween reflects a kind of genre ritual within platformed content cycles.

Recognising the temporal skew introduced by the holiday period, I made the decision to halt this initial data collection phase. While the dataset offered useful insight into seasonal content strategy, it did not represent the typical viewing patterns the study sought to investigate. Therefore, this batch was excluded from the main analysis, though some general observations were retained to inform broader contextual understanding. The priority was to obtain a more representative dataset for the analytical phase, one

that more accurately reflected the everyday rhythms of fan media consumption beyond holiday-induced anomalies.

6.4. Summary of Journaling Study Findings

Participants were asked to complete a structured journal entry each day after watching videogame-related content online. The journaling prompts included the following:

1. Write down the date you are watching
2. What were the first five pieces of videogame content you viewed today? (video titles and URLs are useful)
3. Briefly describe why you watched these five pieces of content first?
4. Do you own any of the games played in the content you viewed today?
5. Briefly describe what you saw in the video content today
6. Describe events from today's video content that made a special impression on you
7. Describe your thoughts and emotions related to these events

As expected with self-submitted journaling, the responses were generally less text-rich than those obtained through interviews. Some participants skipped entries or provided fewer than the requested five videos per day. Nevertheless, after thematic coding and analysis, several key patterns emerged that offer valuable insight into the affective and infrastructural dynamics of everyday fan viewing.

6.4.1 Motivations for Video Selection

The most frequently cited reason for watching specific videos was algorithmic recommendation, particularly through the YouTube home page. Many participants selected content uploaded by channels they were subscribed to, often encountering it on their personalised feed. YouTube's subscription system ensures that newly uploaded videos from subscribed creators appear on a user's home or subscriptions page, making daily media consumption partially automated by platform infrastructure.

Participants also referred to the platform's broader recommendation system as a decisive factor. YouTube's algorithmically curated suggestions included not only content from subscribed creators, but also videos based on prior viewing history, trending topics, and perceived genre affinities. Participants expressed varying levels of awareness about this system, often noting the unpredictability of its suggestions. Although viewers can influence recommendations by marking videos as "Not Interested" or channels as "Don't Recommend," the algorithm largely operates as an opaque and semi-autonomous system. Many participants described learning to manage their feed through repeated interaction, 'training' the algorithm by disliking irrelevant videos or clicking on similar ones.

Another common entry point into content was autoplay; a function whereby YouTube immediately queues the next video after one ends, based on algorithmic prediction. In these cases, the selection of content was entirely delegated to the platform, illustrating a dynamic in which fan engagement becomes partially ambient or backgrounded.

6.4.2 Platform Rituals and Subscription Rhythms

Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned selecting content based on thumbnails or video titles, elements widely regarded by creators as critical to audience capture. Although YouTube offers certain creators tools such as A/B thumbnail testing to maximise click-through rates, participants seemed largely indifferent to these promotional elements once they had subscribed to a channel. Their engagement was habitual and loyal: as long as they remained fans of the channel, they routinely watched new uploads regardless of title or visual packaging.

When engaging with videos outside their subscriptions, participants typically selected content based on game familiarity. In one case, a participant used the platform's hashtag system to browse more content related to *Among Us*, demonstrating how topical pathways within the interface shape discovery. This further highlights the interplay between platform infrastructure and personal fandom: engagement is not solely driven by creator identity, but by franchise or genre interest, which the platform mediates through features like hashtags, autoplay, and sidebar recommendations.

6.4.1. Affective Patterns and Ritualised Viewing

Across multiple entries, participants described watching content as a form of relaxation or emotional decompression. Viewing often occurred after university or work, framed as an evening ritual that offered a sense of familiarity and comfort. The daily release schedules of subscribed creators played a significant role in this practice. Some participants described anticipating uploads from specific channels and watching new content as part of their everyday routine. This behaviour suggests a structured engagement with fandom that is closely tied to the platform's distribution rhythms and technological affordances.

These findings illustrate how participant viewing decisions are co-constructed by personal fandom and platform design. While algorithmic systems shape what content is available and recommended, fans' relationships with specific creators and franchises shape what is actually selected and watched. The journaling data underscores the degree to which everyday fandom is entangled with platform infrastructure; not just in what fans watch, but in how, when, and why they engage.

6.5. Thematic Overview of Journaling Study

Analysis of participant responses yielded six principal themes that characterise the affective, cognitive, and social dimensions of videogame spectatorship. These themes emerged through an inductive coding process grounded in participants' reflections on their emotional responses, viewing motivations, and interpretive engagement across a range of gaming-related content. Although individual entries varied in tone and specificity, several recurring patterns pointed to shared modes of engagement that shape how viewers experience and make meaning from gameplay videos.

"Relaxation and enjoyment" were the most consistently cited motivations. Many participants described videogame content as a form of low-effort entertainment used to unwind after work or study. This mode of engagement often fulfilled a mood-regulating function, associated with comfort, amusement, or escapism. Viewers regularly framed this content as part of their daily leisure routine, with the platformed regularity of uploads and the emotional familiarity of favourite creators reinforcing its place within everyday life.

“Social connection and nostalgia” also emerged as significant affective dimensions. Participants often linked current viewing practices to personal histories of gaming with friends or family, or to imagined scenarios of communal play. These reflections revealed a deep affective resonance, positioning spectatorship as a relational experience. For some, watching gameplay content recreated feelings of togetherness or continuity with earlier forms of social interaction, underscoring the emotionally embedded nature of fandom.

A third theme involved “critical reflection and opinion”. Many participants adopted an evaluative stance toward the content they watched, offering commentary on game design, creator performance, monetisation strategies, or ethical concerns. This mode of spectatorship suggests that gameplay videos function not only as entertainment but also as discursive sites where cultural value, authenticity, and platform politics are assessed and negotiated.

In parallel, some participants framed their engagement through the lens of “learning and skill development”. Gameplay videos were viewed as instructional tools; sources of strategies, mechanics breakdowns, or examples of expert performance that could be applied to the viewer’s own gameplay. This educational mode of viewing aligns with research on peer learning and self-directed knowledge acquisition within digital game cultures, revealing a cognitive dimension of fan practice.

Another theme centred on “creative inspiration and curiosity”. Several participants expressed fascination with unconventional or aesthetically distinctive gameplay moments. They were drawn to narrative originality, symbolic interpretation, or experimental mechanics, suggesting that spectatorship can serve as a space for imaginative speculation and aesthetic appreciation. In these instances, viewing was not merely receptive but exploratory, oriented towards creative engagement.

Finally, “tension and emotional intensity” characterised many of the most memorable viewing experiences. Participants described moments of fear, suspense, or excitement, often linked to horror games or risk-based gameplay, as central to the appeal of the content. These reactions were amplified by the pacing, editing, and expressive performance of the content creators, highlighting the embodied and affective dimensions of spectatorship.

As a result, these six themes present a multidimensional account of videogame spectatorship. They reveal how gameplay content operates as more than entertainment: it is affectively resonant, socially meaningful, and cognitively engaging. These functions are not mutually exclusive but frequently overlap, suggesting that everyday fandom is structured by a complex interplay of routine, reflection, aspiration, and emotional investment. The findings underscore the value of journal-based methodologies for capturing the situated, lived experience of digital media engagement.

6.5.1. Relaxation and Enjoyment

A dominant theme across participants' reflections was the pursuit of relaxation and affective ease through videogame spectatorship. This response pattern suggests that watching videogame content functions for many viewers as a low-effort, emotionally soothing practice; a form of leisure that offers respite from academic, social, or personal demands. As one participant wrote succinctly, "just to relax," indicating an unambiguous emotional objective for engaging with this media.

Other participants expanded on this emotional register, describing a state of mental recovery and mood elevation. One noted, "It makes me feel relaxed after the class, especially when seeing some funny content," explicitly linking their engagement with humour and stress alleviation. Similarly, another respondent reflected, "After watching the first video I felt very relaxing and I also laughed at the pig's stuck situation." These moments of levity, often tied to comical glitches, exaggerated reactions, or absurd game scenarios constitute a recurring appeal of gaming content, suggesting that viewers are actively drawn to experiences that offer emotional uplift.

Affective comfort was sometimes found not just in the content but in the rhythm and familiarity of spectatorship. "I think this game is quite satisfying for people who have a large stress," wrote one viewer, while another added, "They are fun and relaxing at the fun time, which relieves me under a homework-heavy week like this week." These sentiments portray a consumption pattern aligned with media-as-coping-strategy frameworks, wherein the repetitiveness and predictability of certain formats (e.g., Let's Plays, reaction compilations) allow for consistent emotional returns.

Interestingly, emotional pleasure was often coupled with parasocial appreciation. One participant shared: “I enjoy the way that the players react to some strange things and I think they are funny and impressive.” This reveals an intertwined appreciation of both the game content and the personalities of the YouTubers themselves. It is the performative reactions, the exaggerated voice work, facial expressions, and interpersonal banter that often enhance viewer enjoyment beyond what the games alone might provide.

The participants’ remarks suggest that relaxation through spectatorship is not merely the by-product of “doing nothing,” but rather the result of intentional media choices that offer emotional equilibrium. Humour, affective lightness, and the familiar rhythms of content consumption collectively construct a pleasurable and manageable mode of engagement, especially in contrast to the cognitive or emotional demands of everyday life.

6.5.2. Social Connection and Nostalgia

A notable number of participants framed their spectatorship experiences in terms of relational memory and imagined or desired social interaction. This theme of social connection and nostalgia illustrates how gaming content consumption often evokes recollections of shared play, prompts reflections on changing friendship dynamics, or generates a sense of communal presence, even in solitary viewing contexts.

One respondent shared a wistful reflection on past gaming routines with friends: “I remember the good days in Year 1 that I can always go to game arcade with my friends and play happily in the morning without worrying schoolwork... one of them are not really interested in arcade music games anymore, and one of them is not in Hong Kong.” Here, the act of viewing content about rhythm games catalyses a nostalgic recollection of now-diminished friendships and shifting commitments. The statement poignantly captures how mediated game content can serve as a conduit for accessing emotionally resonant memories.

Another participant expressed a desire to reconnect through shared gaming in the near future: “I want to play MaiMai with them again and I hope my friends would be more free during the semester break.” Such responses suggest that spectatorship is

often scaffolded by imagined future co-play scenarios, where watching becomes a precursor to hoped-for social encounters.

Several participants noted that the structure and tone of the videos reminded them of group play dynamics. One wrote: “This game really needs communication to cheat on or to prove innocence, so this could create tension and humorous scenes during the game. Also, I like the interactions of them, which is like a bunch of friends playing with you.” This statement articulates a feeling of ambient sociality, where the performance of togetherness among YouTubers mimics the experience of playing with one’s own peers.

In a similar vein, another respondent noted: “When I watch these kind of gameplay videos (team play gameplay video), it sometimes just makes me think about: what will happen if I play this game with my friends?” This quote illustrates how spectatorship opens an imaginative space in which viewers mentally insert themselves into collaborative gaming contexts, linking parasocial dynamics to personal affective reflection.

The sociality evoked through spectatorship was sometimes indirect, activated through humour or stylised performances. One viewer wrote, “I think they did well on entertaining the audiences, as they can create a fun and silly atmosphere while they are playing, letting the audiences relax and enjoy the videos.” Although not framed explicitly as nostalgic, this comment signals the importance of perceived camaraderie among YouTubers as a proxy for shared joy.

Through these reflections, it is evident that gaming spectatorship often activates memories, desires, and imaginaries of collective play. Whether reminiscing about shared past experiences or projecting possible future ones, participants repeatedly articulated how watching others play games intersects with their own social histories and aspirations. In this sense, digital spectatorship does not operate in isolation, but is deeply entangled with interpersonal attachments, temporal longing, and affective imaginaries of togetherness.

6.5.3. Critical Reflection and Opinion

While many participants responded with emotional or recreational reactions to videogame content, a significant subset demonstrated more evaluative and reflective orientations. These entries revealed a capacity for critical engagement, where participants not only consumed content but assessed its design, cultural relevance, commercial structure, or broader implications. This reflexivity suggests that spectatorship among these viewers is not simply affective or immersive, but often analytical.

One participant, reflecting on content presentation, stated: “The song list of Just Dance 2021 is not new, or trendy enough. I think it’s probably because the production process takes time.” This quote reveals a participant actively engaging with the production timeline of a commercial franchise, offering a reasoned explanation for its perceived shortcomings. Similarly, another remarked on algorithmic exposure and saturation: “I see Among Us videos as long as I open YouTube. Sometimes I feel really tired [sic] to be exposed to Among Us content all the time, especially when I don’t play it.” This response critiques platform dynamics, showing awareness of how content visibility is shaped by recommendation systems rather than personal choice.

Several responses addressed the persuasive power of content creators and their ability to shape consumer behaviour. One participant reflected: “It makes me feel how powerful the content creator is. ...I bought the game when I’m watching this live streaming, it looks really fun.” This statement acknowledges the influence of livestreamers not merely as entertainers but as commercial mediators. Another participant offered a similar reflection: “The way the YouTubers talk about the games always makes me interested in the game even I have no interest in that game before.”

Monetisation strategies also emerged as subjects of critique. Regarding in-game gacha mechanics, one participant remarked: “It made me feel very shocked, actually I think he already spent more than 300,000 yen before and just...Gacha system is so terrible” This quote blends concern with astonishment, highlighting unease with exploitative monetisation systems while also suggesting familiarity with their addictive design. Another participant added a more humorous take: “Players always make fun with the fact that GBF (Granblue Fantasy) is a game that gives many extra resources to the

player while FGO (Fate/Grand Order) is the opposite.” This reflects a knowing engagement with game economies and the communal discourses around fairness, tradition, and reward structures.

Cultural and political reflection also featured in the dataset. One viewer observed in regard to an enemy in Final Fantasy XIV Online: “Dalvag's Final Flame in the China server looks a lot more horrible than the original one, I don't get why they are modifying the model...” Here, attention is drawn to regional censorship or localisation practices, and how such decisions can disrupt aesthetic or narrative continuity. Another participant noted: “I don't think it's interesting, neither my friends. We cannot figure out why this game becomes so popular. I think there's probably some cultural reason behind it.” In this instance, the speaker locates their disinterest in Among Us not in gameplay design, but in its ambiguous cultural appeal, speculating on geographical or sociocultural disjuncture.

Across these reflections, participants demonstrated that watching videogame content was not merely an escapist or affective act, but often a site of informal critique and thoughtful consideration. They assessed creator influence, game design ethics, platform dynamics, and cultural resonance, sometimes with humour, other times with discernment. Spectatorship, then, emerges here not just as leisure, but as a reflexive and intellectually engaged practice.

6.5.4. Learning and Skill Development

For many participants, videogame spectatorship is not simply a form of leisure but also a mode of informal education. Across the dataset, viewers described watching YouTube gameplay videos as an opportunity to acquire new knowledge, refine existing skills, and discover alternative strategies. This theme of learning and skill development reveals how spectatorship often functions as a form of self-directed learning, shaped by aspiration, observation, and adaptation.

One participant noted this explicitly: “Mainly I see the skills performed by the streamers and I try to learn how to win the game.” Here, the viewing experience is framed as goal-oriented, with the streamer positioned as a model for success. Another participant described a similar process of guided learning: “I learned more for playing

Rainbow Six, mainly skills, from the professional players.” These reflections suggest that viewers look to content creators not merely as entertainers but as instructional figures whose performances can be studied and emulated.

Beyond standard mechanics, some participants were inspired by unconventional or innovative playstyles. One wrote: “Some of the pro players play the games with an unpopular style. They created more ways to have fun in the games. But some of the ways to play required extra skills for implementing.” This quote indicates an appreciation not only for mastery but for creativity, where the value of learning lies in expanding the known boundaries of how a game can be played.

For others, the gameplay content encouraged active experimentation and engagement with unfamiliar in-game elements. One participant explained: “These videos made me willing to play with my friends to try new skills or characters.” The phrase “willing to play” implies a motivational shift brought about by spectatorship, a readiness to explore new mechanics or strategies catalysed by the viewing experience.

Some participants described this process with affective undertones of admiration or inspiration. One wrote, “I felt I have gained more skills after watching the plays by the pro players, and satisfaction by watching their success.” The use of “satisfaction” here suggests that the benefits of learning are not only instrumental but also emotional. Another echoed this sentiment, remarking, “The plays in League of Legends in the first video impressed me. The ways he reaches the objectives are fascinating.” This statement highlights not just the acquisition of tactical knowledge, but the sense of awe that often accompanies skilled performance.

While learning was frequently described in relation to personal improvement, some participants also showed an interest in the production and development side of games. One noted: “Of course, I am not the one who thinks everything in the game world should follow the rule of real life... but it is always happy to see the development team put so much effort in the game.” This appreciation for design depth and production quality points to a broader understanding of games as systems with pedagogical and technical dimensions worth engaging with.

In totality, these reflections illustrate how spectatorship is often rooted in an aspirational orientation, one where viewers hope to incorporate what they see into their own gameplay. Whether this entails direct imitation, strategic insight, or appreciation of inventive play, participants consistently framed their viewing as a meaningful site of learning. The result is a form of participatory spectatorship in which players sharpen their skills not only through play, but through careful, affectively invested observation.

6.5.5. Creative Inspiration or Curiosity

A number of participants articulated an interest in the creative, unusual, or imaginative dimensions of the videogame content they watched. While not always explicitly labelled as creativity by respondents, many accounts reflected a fascination with unconventional gameplay, distinctive aesthetics, or interpretive richness. This theme of creative inspiration or curiosity suggests that for some viewers, gaming spectatorship serves not only as entertainment or education but as a stimulus for imaginative engagement.

Several participants were drawn to content that subverted standard gameplay conventions. One participant described a moment in which the playstyle itself stood out in the arcade game *MaiMai*: “It is very impressive that one of the players used his head to press on the button and he got All Perfect (rank) in this song.” This action, a player using their head instead of hands in a rhythm game, signalled an unexpected and playful interaction with the game’s mechanics, offering a sense of performative ingenuity that viewers found memorable.

Another participant expressed enjoyment of players who modified traditional expectations: “It is fun to watch people play games in a special way.” The lack of specificity in this response points to a broader appreciation of deviation, where uniqueness of approach, rather than skill or success, provides the core of viewer interest.

Curiosity about narrative and symbolic content also emerged in several entries. One viewer discussed the impact a narrative of the game they watched: “The plot is – There’s a painting (or photo, I’m not sure) hanging on the wall, in which there is a bare man together with his 4 bare daughters... she killed herself when knowing his father’s death.” This reflection is not only detailed but suggests a keen interpretive engagement

with a game's embedded narrative logic, perhaps prompting the viewer to consider authorial intention and emotional complexity.

Aesthetic and thematic juxtapositions also prompted strong impressions. One participant described a music-video-style game promotion for MaiMai in creative terms: "The MV of the song is about the white cat who wanted to be like the black cat Shama... the sit-ups and turning machines strangely fits the song, which makes me like it." The viewer's curiosity is clearly piqued by the surreal combination of story, motion, and rhythm, an interpretive richness that extends the experience beyond gameplay itself.

Viewers were also drawn to interpretive multiplicity and the speculative discourse around it. One participant wrote in regard to comments about narrative in a video on Dark Souls: "There are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes." This quote, invoking a literary metaphor, demonstrates the participant's belief that story-rich games lend themselves to diverse readings, and that spectatorship becomes a space for comparative interpretation and symbolic elaboration.

Some responses also expressed admiration for the analytical structure of the content itself. As one participant noted, "They always invite some experts or people that have special skills to analyse different games." This quote implies a valuing of deeper understanding, curiosity about mechanisms and themes, and perhaps even a scholarly or technical lens applied to what others may consider entertainment.

Collectively, these responses show that spectatorship can be a trigger for creative and speculative thought. Whether prompted by nonstandard mechanics, narrative ambiguity, or layered design, viewers engaged with game content as interpretive objects. Their curiosity extended beyond what was happening on screen, toward broader questions of meaning, form, and intention; underscoring the ways in which game spectatorship can foster creative imagination and critical speculation alike.

6.5.6. Tension and Emotional Intensity

Although many participants sought enjoyment and relaxation in their viewing, several identified moments of heightened emotional intensity as particularly memorable. These responses underscore how videogame spectatorship can evoke fear, suspense, or

psychological pressure; emotions that are not necessarily negative but are often framed as thrilling or viscerally engaging. The theme of tension and emotional intensity reflects participants' reactions to sudden in-game events, horror elements, and emotionally charged scenarios.

One viewer described the disquieting effect of horror gameplay in *Ao Oni*: "It is very scary when the players meet *Ao Oni* (the seeker) in blindspots, since it is very like a jumpscare and the seeker really succeeds on scaring us and hiders." The use of the term "jumpscare" here is telling, evoking techniques commonly associated with horror cinema and showing how those conventions are transposed into the gaming context. The viewer not only witnesses fear but shares in it, aligning themselves with the players through the pronoun "us."

Another participant recalled a similarly intense moment framed within humour in a Minecraft horror map inspired by a mod for the game *Granny* (2017): "I just laughed at the moment when the Peppa Pig is stuck at the stairs, the moment before is really scary though." This observation captures the fluid emotional shifts within gameplay narratives, where tension and absurdity may follow one another in rapid succession, producing a kind of psychological whiplash that viewers find compelling.

Some viewers responded to emotional extremes with fascination rather than discomfort. One participant commented, "It make me feel very shock, actually I think he already spent more than 300,000 yen before and just... Gacha system is so terrible..." Though the context is financial rather than narrative, the affective response, shock, illustrates how tension can also stem from moments of realisation, moral discomfort, or perceived excess. The participant's sustained interest in the player's behaviour reflects a complex engagement with emotional stakes beyond gameplay itself.

A few participants connected intensity with immersive sound or environmental design. Describing a moment in a modded Minecraft map, one viewer recalled: "There is a part that they need to walk slowly to avoid waking up the guard, while there is a counter counting on how many steps they are walking in a 'noisy' level." The emphasis on movement, silence, and tracking introduces a quiet but palpable sense of tension, heightened by the mechanics of risk and restraint embedded in the game's design.

Tension also arose through dramatic timing or conflict. One participant remarked: “In the second video, the players hid in the room which they are spawned to escape from the Peppa Pig, it keeps staying outside the door to wait to attack them, this scene makes me feel the game has a very tense atmosphere.” The delayed threat, the prolonged waiting, generates an anticipatory anxiety that heightens the overall sense of danger and suspense.

These reflections suggest that emotional intensity, far from being a deterrent, is often central to what makes gameplay compelling for spectators. Whether arising from horror scenarios, strategic tension, or economic shock, these moments offer a spike in engagement and memorability. Spectators are not passive observers of fear or excitement; they are affectively entangled in the experiences they watch, sharing in the suspense, surprise, and emotional charge that define many of gaming’s most impactful moments.

6.6. Limitations

While the research design was carefully structured in advance, the data collection phase presented several challenges that must be acknowledged. Although a usable and meaningful dataset was assembled, a number of obstacles emerged that may limit the consistency and comparability of the findings. These difficulties were primarily related to the practical constraints of conducting research through online ethnographic methods and the varying degrees of participant availability and responsiveness.

One significant limitation involved the differing formats and depths of stakeholder interviews. Some participants agreed to semi-structured video calls lasting over 30 minutes, providing detailed and reflective responses. Others preferred to receive a fixed set of questions via email or text, returning shorter and more concise answers. While longer, synchronous interviews yielded richer qualitative data, even the briefer written responses offered valuable insights, particularly from distinctive or underrepresented stakeholder perspectives. These variations, while limiting the depth of some individual case studies, ultimately expanded the diversity of the dataset.

6.6.1. Fandom Sourcing Controversies

During the second round of participant recruitment, the original procedure was repeated: identifying a fandom forum centred on a popular videogame content creator and inviting participants to complete the journaling study. However, shortly after the data collection phase concluded in October 2020, serious allegations surfaced regarding the creator at the centre of this fandom. The allegations involved alleged mistreatment of fans, prompting both legal scrutiny and widespread community backlash.

The incident triggered a significant shift in the fan community. On the forum, users expressed feelings of betrayal, disbelief, and emotional rupture; responses indicative of the intense parasocial investment many had developed in the creator over time. As additional testimony emerged, participants began to accept the legitimacy of the accusations, with some describing a profound sense of loss or regret over the emotional value they had previously attributed to the creator's content.

Several participants contacted me independently to express their discomfort about continuing to be involved in the study, particularly after having written positively about the creator in their journal entries. In accordance with their wishes, their data was respectfully removed. Given that the majority of participants in this round had been sourced from the same community, I made the decision to exclude the entire dataset from analysis. Retaining only partial data would have risked misrepresenting the participants' affective states under what had become exceptional circumstances.

As a researcher, I was also uneasy about associating the study's findings with a figure now publicly implicated in significant controversy, especially given the project's broader focus on fan–creator dynamics. To maintain participant confidentiality and out of respect for the legal implications, the identity of the content creator has been withheld in this thesis.

While the dataset was ultimately excluded from analysis, the experience offered important insights. It highlighted the fragility of parasocial connection and the ethical volatility inherent in fan–creator relations. The affective attachments documented during the study, once expressions of admiration and comfort, became emotionally dissonant in light of the allegations. This moment underscored how quickly the apparent intimacy of

spectatorship can unravel, revealing the asymmetrical and constructed nature of parasociality. It also prompted a revision of the recruitment strategy to avoid over-reliance on a single fandom base, thus mitigating the risk of emotional or reputational fallout impacting future participant engagement.

6.6.2. Coordinating Stakeholder Interviews

Coordinating stakeholder interviews for this project presented several challenges that required careful planning and negotiation. The videogame industry is characterised by commercial confidentiality and the control of proprietary information, particularly concerning unreleased titles or internal development processes. Studios often impose strict non-disclosure protocols to prevent unauthorised leaks that could disrupt marketing strategies or damage player trust. As a result, external research enquiries, even from students, may be met with caution or refusal, especially when the boundaries of academic inquiry and public discourse are perceived to blur.

Traditional interviews with game studios, particularly those conducted by journalists, are typically governed by controlled talking points and pre-approved scripts. By contrast, interviews for academic purposes are sometimes perceived as less formal or lower-risk, and participants may therefore speak more freely. However, this perceived informality has been exploited in the past. In one illustrative example, Santa Monica Studios writer Alanah Pearce described how her willingness to support student research was compromised by deceptive behaviour:

"I get asked about, uh, university stuff all the time and I don't do any of them because, twice in a row, I was doing all of them anytime anybody needed like thesis help or an interview from somebody worked in the games industry I would do all of it. Twice in a row people lied and said that it was for university and then actually just published it on their YouTube channel or on their shitty gaming blog so now all the students are cut off..." (Alanah IRL, 2022)

Such breaches of trust create reputational harm not only for individuals but for the academic community, making it more difficult for legitimate student researchers to secure access to stakeholders. The incident underscores the precarity of the researcher–participant relationship in digital industries where boundaries between professional, public, and platformed identities are fluid.

In response to this context, I implemented several safeguards to establish my legitimacy as a doctoral researcher and to build trust with potential participants. All correspondence was initiated using an official university email address, clearly marked with a .edu domain. When outreach occurred through alternative platforms such as social media, the initial message included this email address and invited recipients to initiate further contact on their terms. Each communication also contained a link to my institutional research profile and referenced the university's ethics approval process, including the project's unique ethics reference number. While stakeholders were unlikely to verify the number independently, its inclusion signalled transparency and accountability.

The final pool of interviewees reflected a broad spectrum of backgrounds in terms of gender, ethnicity, profession, and geographic location, reflecting the globalised nature of the videogame industry and its fan cultures. Recruitment proceeded through a snowball sampling approach. Accessibility played a key role in selection; I prioritised stakeholders I could reasonably contact and who were likely to respond. For more corporate-facing participants, I relied on formal approaches through institutional channels. While I maintain professional connections in the Hong Kong games industry, I was cautious not to over-rely on this network to avoid limiting the study's cultural scope. After securing a diverse international cohort, I used Hong Kong-based contacts to fill the final remaining gaps in representation.

A further challenge emerged around participant anonymity and the protection of identifying information. Several stakeholders agreed to be interviewed on the condition that details such as their real names or company affiliations would be withheld or generalised. In these cases, descriptors such as "a large-scale studio" or "a content creator with over X subscribers" were used in place of specific identifiers. Some participants also expressed discomfort with signing consent forms using their legal names due to the risk of doxxing; the intentional publication of personal information online (Anderson & Wood, 2022). Despite the project's formal ethics approval and clear research framing, such concerns illustrate the persistent vulnerability felt by many creators operating in public-facing roles. This required careful negotiation to ensure ethical integrity while maintaining participants' trust and safety.

6.7. Summary

This chapter presented findings from a journaling study designed to investigate the everyday content consumption habits and affective engagements of fans within videogame spectator cultures. Using a structured self-reporting method, participants documented their interactions with videogame-related media over a defined period, producing data that illuminated the motivations, patterns, and emotional textures of their engagement. These findings offer a grounded view of how orbital fandom operates not only through acts of creativity or community leadership, but also through routinised viewing, algorithmic suggestion, and platform-specific modes of participation.

Several recurring themes emerged across the dataset, including the influence of YouTube's recommendation algorithms, the role of upload schedules and subscription habits, and the emotional dynamics of fandom; particularly relaxation, nostalgia, and parasocial attachment. Participants frequently cited their loyalty to specific creators or game titles as key motivators for viewing, with daily engagement taking on the character of ritualised media consumption. This behaviour embedded participants more deeply within fandoms, even in the absence of content creation or direct community interaction.

The study also underscored the infrastructural role of platforms in shaping fan behaviour, especially around discoverability and content retention. Although participants rarely mentioned thumbnails or video titles as influencing their choices, their habits were nevertheless shaped by opaque algorithmic logics. The findings highlight the often-overlooked contributions of passive or semi-active fans, whose sustained viewing supports the cultural and economic systems of fandom despite a lack of outward participation.

Collectively, these insights enrich the conceptual framework of orbital fandom by foregrounding the micro-level, affective, and habitual dimensions of fan experience. They demonstrate that fan value is not solely generated through visible creative production, but also through ongoing practices of attention, affiliation, and emotional investment. As a complement to the stakeholder interviews in Chapter 5, this chapter provides a necessary bottom-up perspective, reinforcing the decentralised, relational, and platformed nature of contemporary videogame fandoms.

Chapter 7.

Synthesising the Field: Value, Visibility, and the Structure of Orbital Fandoms

7.1. Introduction

This chapter draws together the empirical findings presented in the previous two chapters in order to advance a critical discussion of orbital fandom within the broader theoretical and methodological framework established in this thesis. By integrating insights from the stakeholder interviews and journaling study, the discussion aims to synthesise individual experiences, community practices, and platformed behaviours into a coherent analysis of how value is produced, circulated, and contested within videogame fan cultures. The chapter reflects on both the shared patterns and the divergent trajectories evident in the data, situating them within the intersecting fields of fandom studies, digital labour theory, platform governance, and videogame culture.

Recognition highlights the uneven processes through which fan labour and creativity are validated, appropriated, or dismissed. In some cases, recognition consolidates community identity and motivates sustained engagement; in others, its absence produces frustration, invisibility, or withdrawal. These tensions clarify how orbital fandom operates not simply as an expressive culture but as a contested arena in which legitimacy and visibility are continually negotiated. The following summary consolidates these insights, drawing together the interdependence of generation, circulation, and recognition as the structural logic of orbital fandom.

The discussion proceeds by examining how the six key themes identified in the stakeholder interviews; validation and recognition, creative labour and fan production, community and social support, boundaries and identity management, platform dynamics, and emotional investment, interact with the patterns observed in the participant journals. Particular attention is paid to how these themes relate to the defining characteristics of orbital fandom, such as degrees of separation from the original text, the centrality of fan–

creator relationships, and the influence of algorithmic systems in shaping visibility and engagement.

This chapter also explores how the empirical findings inform and extend the theoretical model of orbital fandom introduced in Chapter 3. It considers the implications of fandoms that arise and operate through layered forms of mediation, often centred around fan creators rather than game texts themselves. These findings offer a nuanced perspective on how fandom functions within contemporary digital economies, where fan labour, emotional attachment, and platform infrastructures converge in increasingly complex ways.

Through this integrative analysis, the chapter aims to clarify the socio-cultural, affective, and economic dimensions of orbital fandoms, contributing to a more robust understanding of their place within the broader videogame ecosystem. This discussion will also serve as a bridge to the concluding chapter, where the conceptual contributions, practical implications, and future directions of this research will be summarised and critically assessed.

7.1.1. Stakeholder Interviews

The findings from the interviews are important and unique because they offer a multifaceted view of how videogame fandoms serve as more than just spaces for entertainment; they act as platforms for cultural production, personal transformation, and social dynamics. By highlighting the interplay of creativity, community, and professional opportunities, this research demonstrates how fandom extends beyond traditional notions of passive consumerism into an active, participatory culture that fosters meaningful personal and professional growth.

One of the key findings from the interviews is the demonstration of how videogame fandoms enable individuals to bridge the gap between personal passion and professional ambition. The transition from fan to creator, seen across roles such as the journalist, game director, and prop builder, emphasises the unique capacity of fandoms to act as incubators for talent. These stories highlight how informal fan practices, such as crafting or storytelling, can evolve into recognised and sometimes remunerated professional activities, showing the fluid boundaries between fandom and industry. This

dynamic is particularly significant in the context of creative industries, where informal networks and grassroots participation often fuel innovation and career trajectories.

Another distinctive aspect of the interview findings is the role of community in shaping individual experiences. Videogame fandoms provide a rare mix of intimacy and scale, where close-knit communities (e.g., gaming clans, convention circles) coexist within larger, globally interconnected networks. This dual structure allows for both deeply personal connections and broad cultural impact. The Hololive fan's activities in local and global spheres, for instance, highlight how fandoms operate as microcosms of cultural exchange, blending the local and the global in ways that are rarely seen in other social groups. The collaborative and collective nature of these communities not only fosters creativity but also provides emotional and professional support, which is crucial in industries where isolation and competition are common.

The interviews also shed light on the complexities of visibility and recognition within fandoms. While the desire for validation is a common thread, the interviews reveal a spectrum of responses to recognition, ranging from the fan artist's joy at developer acknowledgment to the game designer's preference for remaining within the safety of fan-only spaces. This diversity highlights the nuanced ways individuals navigate the balance between public exposure and personal boundaries, offering insights into the emotional labour and strategic considerations involved in sharing creative work in online and offline spaces. Moreover, the challenges faced by individuals, particularly regarding gendered biases or online harassment, underscore the broader social dynamics at play, making these findings relevant to discussions about equity and inclusivity in fandoms and creative industries.

While this thesis does not centre gender as a primary axis of analysis, the findings suggest that participation within orbital fandom is shaped by broader structures of inclusion and exclusion that intersect with gendered dynamics. Visibility, recognition, and opportunities for engagement are not distributed evenly, and existing research has shown that women and other marginalised groups often encounter additional barriers within both gaming and platformed environments. These dynamics may influence not only who participates in orbital fandom, but also whose contributions are amplified, legitimised, or overlooked. In this sense, orbital fandom does not operate in isolation from wider social inequalities, but rather reflects and, at times, reproduces them through

platform infrastructures and community practices. A more sustained examination of gender and other intersecting factors would therefore be a valuable direction for future research, particularly in understanding how value is differentially experienced across diverse participants.

Importantly, they are not just confined to the realm of videogame fandoms; they have broader implications for understanding participatory culture as a whole. The blending of professional aspirations with grassroots creativity, the collaborative structures of fan communities, and the negotiation of recognition and visibility are themes that resonate across other cultural domains, from music and film to literature and art. By focusing on videogame fandoms, this research provides a study that highlights the broader potential of participatory cultures to reshape how individuals engage with media, create meaning, and find belonging.

On a stakeholder level I also asked as a final (or close to final) question “why did you agree to this interview?” as a way to see if there were any particular motivations for the stakeholders to be involved with an academic endeavour which would likely not result in any material gain for them personally. In cases of interviewee sourced from personal networking or snowballing it was as simple as doing me a “favour”. With our relationship strengthened to the point that asking for an interview is not an inconvenience to the stakeholder in order to maintain a professional friendship. In the case of other stakeholders, it was more of an angle of curiosity with one saying they had never been approached for an interview in regard to their work before. For others it was a case of having a specific viewpoint they wanted to get across. After hearing what my project was about, they simply wanted to share their enthusiasm for their videogame fandom from their perspective. Regardless of their motivations I am deeply thankful to the time and effort dedicated to this project by all involved participants.

In sum, these findings are significant because they illuminate how videogame fandoms function as spaces of cultural innovation, community building, and personal transformation. Their uniqueness lies in capturing the fluid boundaries between fandom and professional spheres, the interplay of local and global dynamics, and the emotional and social complexities of creative participation. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of how participatory cultures operate and their potential to shape individual lives and industries alike.

7.1.2. Participant Journaling

The analysis of the themes emerging from participants' viewing of videogame content reveals several noteworthy patterns. Broad categories such as relaxation and enjoyment, community, and social interaction, and learning and skill development emerged as dominant motivations for watching, with the strongest emphasis placed on gameplay-driven content. The thematic breakdown shows that participants are primarily motivated by the relaxing nature of watching gameplay, with significant engagement stemming from their interest in specific games or content creators they subscribe to. This reflects the centrality of gameplay in fostering viewer enjoyment, underscoring its role as a core component of the overall viewing experience.

In relation to learning and skill development, viewers were particularly drawn to content that showcased gameplay strategies, skills displayed and gameplay mistakes. The presence of such content suggests that many viewers are actively seeking to improve their own gameplay by observing others, reinforcing the value of videogame content as an educational tool. Moreover, the frequent mention of mistakes and strategies implies that viewers are not merely passive consumers but engage critically with the content, deriving both entertainment and practical insights.

The social dimension of videogame content consumption is evident in the prominence of community and social interaction. The importance of player interactions and community discussions reveals that viewers often look for content that fosters a sense of belonging or community engagement. Subscribers and content shared by friends indicate that social relationships and recommendations are key drivers for engagement, further emphasising the social aspect of gaming culture.

Another significant theme relates to tense and exciting moments, with viewers often recalling unexpected events, tense gameplay situations, and competition. This highlights how excitement and unpredictability are compelling factors in keeping viewers engaged. Such moments likely provide viewers with a sense of thrill, akin to the experience of playing the game themselves.

Lastly, memes and cultural impact surfaced as a notable category, with viewers frequently commenting on funny moments, silly or unusual moves, and fan-created

content, such as fan animations. This reflects how gaming content transcends the boundaries of gameplay, influencing broader internet culture and becoming part of meme-based and fan-driven interactions. The inclusion of IRL (In Real Life) imitating games and fan animation further points to the participatory nature of gaming content, where viewers are not just passive consumers but also creators of cultural artifacts that stem from the content they watch.

In sum, these highlight the multifaceted reasons viewers engage with videogame spectator content, ranging from personal enjoyment and relaxation to skill development and social connection. It also highlights the broader cultural influence of gaming content, particularly in terms of its role in shaping online communities and internet culture.

7.1.3. Comparing Coding

The preceding discussion of value generation underscores the multiple ways in which fans, creators, and developers contribute to the cultural and social life of games. Yet generation alone does not capture the dynamics of fandom; the value produced by these practices must also be mobilised and redistributed. It is therefore necessary to turn from how value is created to how it circulates across platforms, communities, and markets. The comparative coding process between the stakeholder interviews and the journaling study reveals both convergence and divergence in the types of values, practices, and motivations expressed by participants. While both groups demonstrate investment in videogame-related content, their modes of engagement, the platforms they occupy, and the forms of labour they perform are often distinct. Stakeholder interviews tended to emphasise production, creativity, and identity through output; whether as artists, developers, performers, or organisers, whereas the journaling study more frequently highlight viewing habits, emotional routines, and content selection. This section outlines how these thematic similarities and differences map onto the broader analytical categories used in this thesis, providing a structured basis for understanding the differentiated roles within the wider ecosystem of videogame spectatorship.

Orbital fandom is evident in how participants engage with the fandom in ways that deviate from traditional consumption patterns. Instead of merely playing games or consuming official media, individuals create fan-driven outputs such as cosplays, fan fiction, parody content, or indie-focused YouTube videos. For example, the fan artist and

prop builder operate on the periphery of the game's core activities by creating physical artifacts inspired by game worlds, contributing to fandom in ways that exist parallel to, but distinct from, the games themselves. Similarly, the sex worker's participation in a parody highlights a form of engagement that both celebrates and subverts the original game, adding a layer of interpretative creativity that diverges from traditional fandom boundaries.

Orbital fandom often involves a negotiation between fan-created and official content, with participants occupying spaces where the lines between these categories blur. The tailor's cosplays for an official event and the prop builder's commissioned work for game developers exemplify this dynamic. Both participants began as fans but transitioned to creating work that was recognised and utilised within official capacities. While their creations orbit the core of official game development, they remain distinct in their fan-driven origins and creative independence. The YouTuber's collaboration with indie developers further highlights this intersection. By focusing on niche games and interacting directly with developers, they promote works that might otherwise remain under the radar, amplifying voices within the indie scene while orbiting the larger gaming industry.

Orbital fandom is also characterised by the decentralised, community-driven projects that expand upon or reinterpret the central cultural artifact. The Hololive fan's contributions to subreddit discussions and local fan projects highlight how fans extend fandom into new spaces, creating their own celebratory structures (e.g., birthday events) independent of the original creators. These activities add value to the fandom while existing at its periphery. The journalist's experiences with Metal Gear Online clans provide another example. Through in-game rituals, social meetups, and collaborative activities, these groups created their own subcultures around the game. Their farewell session for the server shutdown is emblematic of how orbital fans often imbue their experiences with unique meaning that may diverge from, or even transcend, the intentions of the game's creators.

A key feature of orbital fandom is the variable relationship fans have with recognition and validation. While some seek acknowledgment from official sources, others operate more comfortably in fan-only spaces, orbiting the core of fandom without engaging directly with creators or industry figures. The game designer's reluctance to

share fan fiction with developers contrasts with the fan artist's pursuit of professional acknowledgment, illustrating how orbital fandom accommodates both inward-focused and outward-facing motivations. The sex worker's viral parody exemplifies a form of validation that is incidental to, rather than sought from, the original creators, showing how fan-driven content can gain recognition on its own terms.

Social media serves as a platform for globalising and decentralising fandom, enabling fans to create subcultures that orbit the main fandom but engage with it in unique ways. For example, the Hololive fan uses social media to amplify local fan efforts, bridging gaps between global and regional fandoms. The YouTuber's use of Discord to cultivate a smaller, more personal fan community exemplifies how orbital fans can create micro-ecosystems that revolve around, but remain distinct from, the broader gaming fandom. At the same time, the game director's viral tweet and the sex worker's online discourse highlight how orbital fandom can shape public perceptions of the original work. These moments exemplify how fan-created and fan-amplified content can generate conversations that sometimes overshadow or diverge from official narratives.

The concept of orbital fandom is deeply embedded in these findings, as they showcase how individuals and communities engage with video game culture in ways that both complement and diverge from traditional modes of participation. Whether through creative reinterpretations, community-driven initiatives, or the blending of fan and professional spaces, these participants expand the boundaries of fandom, creating a rich, decentralised ecosystem that orbits around shared cultural artifacts. This highlights the dynamic and layered nature of video game fandoms, where fans are not just participants but active agents shaping the culture in multifaceted and innovative ways.

7.1.4. Stakeholder Interview Connections to Orbital Videogame Fandom

The findings provide a compelling lens through which to examine the concept of orbital fandom, where individuals and groups engage with a central cultural phenomenon; such as a videogame, a developer, or a fandom ecosystem, without necessarily adhering to the "core" activities or official structures traditionally associated with that phenomenon. Orbital videogame fandom highlights the diversity and decentralisation of fan

engagement, where activities revolve around a shared interest but may diverge in purpose, scope, or form. The interviews bring the connection to this concept together in several ways.

Orbital fandom is evident in how participants engage with the fandom in ways that deviate from traditional consumption patterns. Instead of merely playing games or consuming official media, individuals create fan-driven outputs such as cosplays, fan fiction, parody content, or indie-focused YouTube videos. For example, the fan artist and prop builder operate on the periphery of the game's core activities by creating physical artifacts inspired by game worlds, contributing to fandom in ways that exist parallel to, but distinct from, the games themselves. Similarly, the sex worker's participation in a parody highlights a form of engagement that both celebrates and subverts the original game, adding a layer of interpretative creativity that diverges from traditional fandom boundaries.

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7.1.5. Participant Journaling Connections to Orbital Videogame Fandom

The results from the analysis of participants watching videogame YouTubers strongly relate to the concept of orbital fandom, as they illuminate the layered and indirect ways fans engage with gaming culture beyond traditional gameplay experiences. Orbital fandom, as conceptualised in the thesis, refers to fan engagement that revolves around the cultural artifacts or performances derived from a videogame, rather than direct interaction with the game itself. The participants' motivations and experiences with YouTube content demonstrate several key ways in which orbital fandom operates through the key themes identified by the participants.

Firstly, the theme of relaxation and enjoyment highlights the appeal of consuming videogame content as a passive, stress-free alternative to active gameplay. By engaging with Let's Plays, walkthroughs, or comedic game commentary, participants position themselves as spectators who derive entertainment from the creative reinterpretation of games by content creators. This shift in focus, from the game to the creator's performance or narrative, exemplifies the orbital nature of their fandom. These viewers are connected to the game through the lens of the YouTuber, rather than through direct gameplay.

The theme of community and social interaction further highlights the social dynamics of orbital fandom. Participants often described feeling part of a larger community facilitated by YouTubers, where the shared appreciation of content fosters a sense of belonging. These parasocial and community-driven bonds extend beyond the game itself, as viewers form connections with other fans of the content creator and engage in communal discourse about the gaming content. This exemplifies the "orbit" of engagement, where the focus is on the social and cultural networks surrounding the game rather than the game as a standalone artifact.

The theme of learning and skill development reflects another dimension of orbital fandom. Participants valued the educational aspects of watching gaming content, such as learning strategies, tips, or insights into a game's mechanics. Here, the YouTuber acts as an intermediary, translating the complexities of the game into digestible and actionable knowledge. This role reinforces the indirect relationship participants have with

the game, where their primary interaction is mediated through the content creator's expertise and presentation.

Participants' enjoyment of tense and exciting moments reveals how orbital fandom thrives on the performative and emotional aspects of gaming content. The dramatization of high-stakes gameplay moments by YouTubers often elevates these experiences, creating a shared narrative that captivates viewers. This performative dimension reflects how orbital fandoms reinterpret gaming experiences as cultural artifacts, distinct from the direct interaction of primary gameplay.

Lastly, the influence of memes and cultural impact highlights the broader cultural ecosystem that orbital fandoms sustain. By engaging with humorous or creative reinterpretations of game content, participants contribute to the cultural footprint of the game, even without directly playing it. This reinforces the idea that orbital fandoms are crucial for the dissemination and evolution of gaming culture, as they amplify and transform the original game into a shared cultural phenomenon.

In summary, the results show that participants' engagement with videogame YouTubers encapsulates the core dynamics of orbital fandom. They demonstrate how fans contribute to and derive value from gaming culture in ways that extend beyond gameplay, through passive consumption, communal interaction, and creative reinterpretation. This relationship highlights the layered and indirect nature of orbital fandoms, underscoring their significance in the broader ecosystem of videogame culture.

7.1.6. Videogame Business Related to Fans

A substantial body of scholarship has sought to unpack the motivations, practices, and structural conditions underpinning fan labour. This research has been instrumental in tracing how fans engage in creative production and distribution, particularly within the digital ecosystems surrounding videogames. By interrogating the interplay between affective investment, community participation, and platform governance, such work provides a foundational lens through which to understand how fan activities generate cultural, social, and occasionally economic value. These insights are vital for contextualising the emergence of fan labour as a form of unpaid yet structurally significant participation in contemporary media economies. In contrast, the "value

creation” perspective examines how fan activities are entangled in the broader value networks of the videogame industry, contributing cultural, symbolic, and economic capital that may be leveraged by commercial stakeholders. This perspective encompasses the economic, cultural, and social dimensions of fan engagement. Fans are recognised not merely as consumers but as co-creators of value. Their activities, such as generating user-generated content, engaging in fan communities, or participating in fan events, collectively enhance the value proposition of the videogame product or brand. In essence, fans assume an integral role in augmenting the overall worth and impact of the industry.

Videogame genre also plays a role in shaping the contours of orbital fandom, but it does not act as a fixed boundary for participation. Certain genres may lend themselves more readily to specific forms of fan engagement, such as horror games generating reaction-based content or competitive games fostering performance-oriented communities. However, the findings of this study suggest that orbital fandom is often organised less around individual game genres and more around creators, platforms, and styles of engagement. Fans frequently move across multiple games linked by shared aesthetics, play styles, or the presence of particular content creators, rather than remaining tied to a single title or genre. This linking process reflects the decentralised nature of orbital fandom, where the primary anchor of engagement may shift away from the game itself towards broader patterns of content consumption and community interaction. As a result, genre influences participation but does not determine it, highlighting the fluid and networked structure of contemporary videogame fandom.

The existing body of research predominantly aligns with these two foundational perspectives, shedding light on the intricate relationship between videogame business and its enthusiastic fan base. Nevertheless, there remains ample room for further exploration and nuanced analysis to comprehensively delineate the multifaceted dynamics of this symbiotic relationship.

7.1.7. Fan Power Dynamics

The dynamics among game developers, primary fans, and orbital fans are characterised by flexible layers that revolve around hierarchies and power structures. Game developers primarily target the core fanbase, the primary fans, to promote and sell their

games. Establishing positive relationships with primary fans can provide game developers with various forms of value, whether monetary, social, or cultural, which can also be leveraged to influence orbital fans.

Orbital fans, on the other hand, may not be the primary target audience, yet they represent a valuable secondary market; especially for content created by the primary fans. In this sense, orbital fans also hold value for game developers. Furthermore, orbital fans who develop obsessive fandom or parasocial relationships with primary fan creators are more likely to support a game if their primary fan creators endorse it. One distinctive aspect of orbital fandom in the realm of videogames is the close proximity it maintains to both primary fans and game developers they admire. Primary fan content creators, like Let's Players or livestreamers, often engage in the same activities as their orbital fans, such as playing videogames.

This proximity leads to the concept of “zones of entanglement”, which offers a useful framework for understanding the different degrees of engagement between fans and developers and the varying levels of ownership from the fan's perspective (Chia et al., 2019). In these zones, the distinction between fan labourers and videogame producers are less clear compared to traditional media. These zones of entanglement were formed from Barad (2007), considering fans and developers through a social media lense, as expanded in John Bank's work on *Co-creating Videogames* (2013). They were later developed into the concept of politicised agency in digital agency after humanism (Chia & Ruffino, 2022).

The evolving nature of videogames, with updates and patches post-launch, enables fans to have a more direct impact on a game's development, something not as prevalent in other media industries.

In some cases, fan contributions can significantly influence a game's longevity and profitability. An example highlighted the role of player feedback in the game design process. Through player feedback Supermassive Game, a British Video game studio, discovered that gamers were playing their single-player narrative horror game 'Until Dawn' (2015) in group settings, passing the controller among friends based on the character they were controlling. In response, when designing their next game 'Man of Medan' (2019), the developers included a specific mode called 'movie night mode.' This

mode enables players to assign characters to specific individuals and indicating when to swap the controller. It serves as a direct example of a game mechanic shaped by the developer-player zones of entanglement.

These zones of entanglement also tie into the formation of parasocial relationships between fans and their content creators. For instance, the Hololive Moments translation group serves as an illustrative example of an orbital fandom with perceived power. Hololive Moments, composed of approximately 2,000 fans of the Japanese VTuber group Hololive, was dedicated to translating clips and entire streams of Hololive VTubers into multiple languages. VTubers are virtual YouTubers who often focus on videogame livestreams in collaboration with game developers. At its zenith, the Hololive Moments YouTube fan channel had over 200,000 subscribers, with even more on other platforms. However, when two Hololive talents became embroiled in controversy in September 2020 and received a two-week suspension, Hololive Moments expressed strong disagreement with the punishment. They demanded stricter penalties for the streamers and suspended their translation fanworks until their conditions were met. Hololive Moments argued that their contributions had significantly benefited Cover Corporation, the company behind Hololive, through increased collaborations and donations. This assertion met with disapproval from many general Hololive fans, who saw Hololive Moments as overstepping their role and power. Ultimately, Hololive Moments lost the social, cultural, and monetary capital they had accumulated, leading to the dissolution of their group. This example highlights the complex power dynamics within orbital fandoms and their relationship with primary fans and developers.

Fan labour exploitation is intricately linked to fan power dynamics within the videogame ecosystem. The exploitation of fan labour often involves the exertion of power by various stakeholders, primarily game companies and developers, over fans who contribute content, participate in online communities, or engage in other fan activities. These activities are a manifestation of fan power, as fans shape and contribute to the videogame culture. However, when this fan labour is exploited without adequate compensation or recognition, it can lead to power imbalances, as exemplified by the Exploitation Ecosystem (ExEc) model (McCutcheon et al 2022).

Fan power dynamics involve the ways in which fans collectively and individually exert influence over the videogame industry. They can advocate for changes in games,

influence game design choices, and even impact the success of content creators and esports teams through financial support or participation in fan activities. The ExEc model illustrates the intricate power dynamics within the exploitation ecosystem, demonstrating how entry pathways to exploitation, sustaining mechanisms, and exit pathways function. Fan labour exploitation can disrupt these dynamics by disempowering fans, eroding trust, and damaging the sense of reciprocity within the fan community. Therefore, understanding and addressing fan labour exploitation is crucial for maintaining balanced fan power dynamics and fostering a healthy and sustainable videogame ecosystem. It requires ethical considerations and industry responsibility to ensure that fan contributions are appropriately acknowledged and compensated.

7.2. Potential Framework

Based on the results of my studies, research and literature review I would like to propose a potential theoretical framework of Orbital Fandom. This theoretical framework conceptualises the value flow within videogame orbital fandoms, highlighting the interplay between fans, content creators, and developers/publishers. It draws from the social, cultural, and monetary forms of capital discussed in the thesis and provides a structured understanding of how value circulates in this ecosystem. The framework is divided into three core components: value generation, value circulation, and value recognition, each of which interacts across stakeholders.

This section presents a detailed exposition of the Orbital Fandom Framework, a conceptual model developed to articulate the dynamics of value generation, circulation, and recognition within platform-mediated videogame fandoms. The framework was formulated in response to the increasingly layered, decentralised, and affectively charged nature of contemporary fandom, particularly as it unfolds around Let's Players, livestreamers, VTubers, and community creators. The model builds on theoretical traditions in fan studies, game studies, digital labour theory, and platform governance to map the relationships between three primary stakeholders: fans, content creators, and developers/publishers. It is structured around three interlocking analytical dimensions: value generation, value circulation, and value recognition.

7.3. Section 1: Value Generation

Understanding how value is generated within orbital fandoms requires attention to the specific practices, motivations, and social positions of different stakeholder groups. This section explores the ways in which fans, content creators, and developers each participate in the generation of value within the broader videogame ecosystem. Drawing on the tripartite typology of cultural, social, and monetary value developed earlier in the thesis, the analysis traces how these forms emerge through acts of creative production, community engagement, and platformed visibility.

Unlike traditional value chains, where production is often linear and institutionalised, value in orbital fandoms is frequently co-constructed, decentralised, and contingent. Fans generate cultural value by reinterpreting, remediating, or extending game texts; creators add social value through community interaction and affective labour; and developers harness these contributions to shape brand identity, cultivate goodwill, and inspire participatory loyalty. The generation of value, then, is not merely a question of economic output but of meaning-making, legitimacy, and alignment with the evolving aesthetics and expectations of participatory culture.

By disaggregating these modes of value creation across distinct stakeholder roles, this section establishes the groundwork for understanding how such value is subsequently circulated and recognised; both within communities and across the platformed architectures that structure digital fan practices.

7.3.1. Fans as Cultural and Social Producers

Fans contribute cultural value through transformative works such as fanfiction, fan art, modding, and cosplay. These practices expand the narrative and aesthetic lifespan of games and foster a form of participatory authorship (Jenkins, 1992; Hills, 2002). In addition to cultural production, fans also generate social value by building vibrant communities around shared interests. These communities often organise themselves via digital infrastructures such as Discord servers, subreddits, and livestream chats. Such spaces enable identity formation, emotional support, and knowledge exchange, operating as vital nodes within broader fan ecosystems.

YouTube collective The Yogscast were early adopters in playing the game Minecraft on their channel while it was still in beta stage gaining great success with their Minecraft based videos. They identified their own role as social and cultural producers for the game even in these early stages with member Simon Lane saying “We are *Minecraft*’s PR! I think we enjoy a symbiotic relationship with Mojang and have definitely contributed to each other’s success. I’m very thankful we’ve done so well out of it.” (Brown, 2011).

Although fans rarely extract direct monetary value from their work, their attention and participation sustain platform economies and drive discoverability for developers. Their affective investment indirectly contributes to the monetary value of games, especially in cases where fan-driven hype sustains or revitalises interest in a title long after its release.

7.3.2. Content Creators as Performers and Entrepreneurs

Content creators, including YouTubers, streamers, and VTubers, reinterpret gameplay through a performative lens. Their work blends commentary, humour, narrative construction, and audience interaction to produce new meanings from existing IPs. These performances are not merely ancillary but constitute a primary mode of engagement for many fans, making the creators themselves objects of fandom. Creators also generate cultural and social value, serving as curators and tastemakers within digital fandoms.

Early access game Bear Simulator found itself on the receiving end of a creator’s ire after YouTuber Pewdiepie was not impressed with the game after playing it on his channel. “Honestly this game’s a piece of shit, the more I play the more I realise it. This video is now a PSA of like, don’t buy this game...I thought I could make a funny video out of it but it’s so bad.” (Pewdiepie, 2016). At the end of the video, he finds out the game was crowdfunded, raising \$100,000, and decides to try and get a refund for the game because he cannot believe it cost so much money to develop. The resulting vitriol towards the developer from Pewdiepie fans was enough for them to announce a few days later they were no longer going to continue developing the game (Farjay Studios, 2016).

Monetary value is typically realised through platform monetisation (e.g., YouTube ad revenue, Twitch subscriptions), third-party support (e.g., Patreon, Ko-Fi), and brand partnerships. These creators often operate as small-scale entrepreneurs, navigating a complex field of algorithmic visibility, audience metrics, and shifting platform policies.

7.3.3. Developers and Publishers as Infrastructure Providers

Developers and publishers generate foundational value by releasing and maintaining the IPs that structure the entire fan ecosystem. They may also provide tools that enable co-creation, such as modding kits, workshop modes, or creative contests. Through official endorsements, community engagement, and selective integration of fan works, they contribute to the broader cultural field surrounding their games.

In 2012 developers of the game Lollipop Chainsaw launched a competition to find the IRL “face” of the game’s protagonist Juliet Starling on the videogame journalism website IGN (IGN, 2012). The competition was won by cosplayer Jessica Nigri who was then flown around the USA to serve as the official representation of Juliet during promotional events. The logistical infrastructure of these appearances provided by these public appearances served not only to promote the game but also encourage Nigri’s fans to visit as well.

Crucially, developers are positioned to extract both direct and indirect monetary value. This includes sales revenue, microtransactions, DLC purchases, and the increased visibility and relevance generated by orbital fan activities. Their ability to curate and control the boundaries of acceptable fan engagement situates them as platform-like actors in the political economy of videogame fandom.

7.4. Section 2: Value Circulation

While value generation establishes the foundational contributions made by fans, creators, and developers, it is through circulation that these contributions gain visibility, resonance, and extended influence. Value circulation refers to the processes by which cultural, social, and monetary value move through, across, and beyond fan communities and platform infrastructures. Unlike static forms of output, value in orbital fandoms is inherently dynamic, shaped by algorithmic recommendation systems, audience

engagement patterns, and the platform-specific affordances that govern discoverability and amplification.

This section examines how value circulates within and between stakeholder groups, attending to the infrastructural mechanisms that privilege certain kinds of participation over others. It foregrounds the role of platforms, particularly YouTube, Twitch, and Discord as both conduits and filters of circulation, whose design choices and governance practices directly affect whose contributions are seen, shared, or monetised. The asymmetrical nature of these processes is also highlighted, revealing how a relatively small subset of creators or content types benefit disproportionately from circulation economies, often translating cultural or social capital into financial gain.

By analysing the material and immaterial flows that shape the afterlife of generated value, this section extends the orbital fandom framework to account for the uneven terrain on which fans and creators operate. In doing so, it builds toward a fuller understanding of how value is not only produced but also structured, stratified, and strategically managed within participatory media environments.

7.4.1. Circulating Cultural Value

Cultural value in orbital fandoms circulates through the iterative creation and dissemination of content. Fan art inspires further artwork, mods build upon previous modifications, and Let's Play series prompt meme creation and remixes. The circulation of cultural value fosters interpretive flexibility, enabling a multiplicity of readings and attachments.

Music Artist The Living Tombstone has built a career from making songs based on videogame properties to great success on YouTube. Their original song about the franchise Five Night's at Freddy's garnered over 380 million views on YouTube alone (The Living Tombstone, 2014), becoming closely associated with the game an example of a high production value fan work. When the Five Night's at Freddy's film adaptation was released in cinemas this song was chosen to play over the end credits, which was kept secret from audiences at the time. The reaction from fans was intense with journalists praising that the film producers "hasn't forgotten the people who made the IP such a valuable sensation in the first place" (Colangelo, 2023).

Platforms play a central role in this process, algorithmically amplifying or suppressing particular kinds of content. Content tagged, shared, and remixed can gain momentum across social media ecosystems, embedding fan labour within a system of participatory promotion.

7.4.2. Circulating Social Value

Social value is exchanged and reinforced through community rituals, parasocial interactions, and collaborative events. Fans bond over shared jokes, traditions, and emotional experiences, creating resilient communities that transcend individual games or creators.

James Willems of the YouTube channel Funhaus was able to land a voice acting role in the game Psychonauts 2 by leveraging the Funhaus fandom's online social influence to start a #jamesforpsychonauts2 hashtag on twitter. The fans, knowing James' love of the original Psychonauts game where he stated he would play any role in the game, "even a toilet flushing", were able to get the attention of the game's lead developer Tim Schafer. This led to the announcement of James' inclusion in the game as "Toilet #4" as a reference to this fan in-joke, although he was given an actual character role of "Rich Dad" when the game was eventually released (James Willems, 2021).

Livestreams and fan-organised events serve as temporal anchors for these exchanges, while Discord servers and Reddit threads function as persistent spaces for ongoing relational labour. Social value circulates in recognisable forms: fan roles (e.g., moderators), status markers (e.g., top donator badges), and shared affective narratives.

7.4.3. Circulating Monetary Value

While much of fandom operates within a gift economy, monetary value flows through several overlapping channels. Fans support creators via donations, memberships, and merchandise purchases, while creators monetise visibility through ad revenue and sponsorships. Developers capture value indirectly through extended engagement and directly through increased game sales.

The \$100 million contract offered to livestreamer xQc by Kick.com in 2023 (Browning, 2023) exemplifies these extremities of monetary value circulation in platform economies. It demonstrates how individual content creators, whose followings are cultivated through parasocial engagement and platform visibility, are now positioned as high-yield economic actors, with fan loyalty and watch time treated as monetisable assets by emerging platforms seeking market share

However, monetary circulation is asymmetrical. Developers and platforms often extract disproportionate value, while fans and even mid-level creators may remain precariously positioned. The unequal distribution of monetary reward relative to cultural labour performed reveals the systemic imbalances within the fandom economy.

7.5. Section 3: Value Recognition

If value generation constitutes the initial contribution of fan and creator labour, and circulation describes its movement and transformation across platforms, then value recognition addresses the critical question of how such contributions are acknowledged, legitimised, or dismissed. Recognition is not merely a symbolic gesture but a consequential act that confers status, visibility, and sometimes material opportunity upon particular participants. Within orbital fandoms, where formal authorship is often blurred and legitimacy is negotiated rather than assumed, recognition plays a leading role in shaping the hierarchies and economies of participatory culture.

This section examines how recognition operates across fan, creator, and developer domains, drawing attention to the criteria by which contributions are amplified, incorporated, or rejected. Recognition may take the form of direct endorsement, such as retweets, shoutouts, or platform elevation, but it can also manifest as selective incorporation, such as when fan-made content is adapted into canonical game texts or brand campaigns. Conversely, disavowal or strategic silence also constitute forms of recognition, often reflecting corporate attempts to manage reputational risk or maintain aesthetic and ideological boundaries.

By analysing recognition as a site of governance and contestation, this section highlights the uneven power relations embedded in platformed cultural production. It further argues that recognition functions as a mechanism of soft control, enabling

developers and platforms to influence participatory practices without recourse to overt suppression. In doing so, the section advances the thesis's broader argument that value within orbital fandoms is not only created and circulated but also filtered through complex, often asymmetrical, systems of visibility and legitimacy.

While value generation and circulation describe how cultural, social, and monetary value emerge and move within orbital fandom ecosystems, recognition addresses the conditions under which these contributions are acknowledged, legitimised, or rendered invisible. Within the context of orbital fandom, recognition is not evenly distributed, nor is it guaranteed. Instead, it operates as a selective and often asymmetrical process shaped by platform infrastructures, corporate governance, and community dynamics. As such, recognition constitutes a critical site through which power relations within fan ecosystems are both expressed and reinforced.

In this thesis, recognition is understood as the process by which contributions made by fans, content creators, and other participants are validated, made visible, and attributed value within a given system. This validation may take multiple forms, including symbolic acknowledgement (such as visibility, attribution, or endorsement), infrastructural support (such as platform promotion or integration into official systems), and economic reward (such as monetisation opportunities or direct compensation). These forms of recognition are not mutually exclusive, yet they do not necessarily co-occur. A fan's work may achieve widespread visibility without financial reward, or may be monetised without formal acknowledgement from developers or platforms. The uneven distribution of these recognition forms highlights the fragmented and conditional nature of value within orbital fandom.

At the level of fan communities, recognition often operates through peer validation and collective visibility. Practices such as sharing, commenting, and remixing serve to amplify certain works while marginalising others, contributing to informal hierarchies of status within the community. These processes are shaped not only by aesthetic or creative merit, but also by timing, platform affordances, and alignment with prevailing trends. As a result, recognition within fan spaces is both participatory and contingent, dependent on collective attention rather than formal accreditation. This aligns with existing understandings of participatory culture, yet within orbital fandom these

dynamics are intensified by the centrality of platforms that algorithmically structure visibility.

For content creators, recognition is more directly entangled with platform systems. Metrics such as views, watch time, subscriber counts, and engagement rates function as quantifiable indicators of value, often determining not only visibility but also access to monetisation features. However, these metrics are governed by opaque algorithmic processes that privilege certain forms of content over others, thereby shaping what kinds of creative labour are recognised and rewarded. In this sense, recognition is not simply a reflection of audience preference, but a product of platform logics that mediate and structure that preference. Creators operating within orbital fandoms must therefore navigate these systems strategically, often adapting their content practices to align with algorithmic expectations in order to maintain visibility and income.

At the level of developers and publishers, recognition takes on a more formalised and strategic character. As discussed in earlier chapters, corporate actors engage with fan labour through a range of practices that include facilitation, endorsement, selective incorporation, and, at times, suppression. Recognition in this context may involve retweeting fan works, featuring community creations in official channels, or integrating fan-designed content into the game itself. Such practices confer a form of institutional legitimacy, signalling that particular forms of fan engagement are not only acceptable but desirable. However, this recognition is highly selective and contingent upon alignment with brand identity, marketability, and legal considerations. Fan works that deviate from these parameters, such as those deemed inappropriate, politically sensitive, or commercially risky, may be ignored or actively removed.

This selective recognition underscores the asymmetrical power relationship between fans and corporate actors. While fan labour contributes significantly to the cultural and economic life of games, the authority to recognise, legitimise, or exclude these contributions remains largely in the hands of developers and platforms. Recognition, in this sense, functions as a mechanism of governance, shaping the boundaries of acceptable participation and directing the flow of value within the ecosystem. It is through recognition that certain forms of labour are elevated and others

marginalised, reinforcing existing hierarchies while maintaining the appearance of participatory openness.

Importantly, the absence of recognition does not imply the absence of value. Fan contributions may generate substantial cultural or social value within communities even when they are not acknowledged by platforms or developers. However, the lack of formal recognition can limit the translation of this value into economic or institutional forms, constraining the sustainability of fan labour and reinforcing precarious conditions of participation. This disconnect between value creation and recognition is a defining feature of orbital fandom, where visibility, legitimacy, and reward are unevenly distributed across different actors and forms of engagement.

To conclude, recognition completes the framework established in this chapter by illustrating how value is not only produced and circulated, but also differentially acknowledged within systems structured by platform governance and corporate control. By foregrounding recognition as a distinct analytical dimension, this thesis highlights the importance of examining not only what fans and creators do, but how their contributions are validated, appropriated, or disregarded within broader socio-technical systems. In doing so, it emphasises that the dynamics of orbital fandom cannot be fully understood without accounting for the uneven and contested processes through which value is recognised.

7.5.1. Fan Recognition

Fans often seek recognition from peers, creators, and developers. Recognition may come in the form of social media reposts, shout-outs, competition wins, or the inclusion of fan work in official materials. Yet recognition is inconsistently granted and often conditional on brand alignment or market utility.

When Playtonic Games announced their spiritual successor to Banjo-Kazooie; Yooka-Laylee, in 2017 they opted to include YouTuber Jonathan Jafari (JonTron) as a voice actor in their game given his love of the previous Banjo-Kazooie franchise expressed in Let's Plays and the potential social value he could bring. After JonTron made controversial talking points online, Playtonic decided to remove him from the game in order to distance themselves from him (Dring, 2017). For Playtonic, the damage of the

controversial statements outweighed the perceived value JonTron could bring to the game.

Fans whose work deviates from perceived brand-safe aesthetics, such as erotic parody, political mods, or subversive art, may be marginalised or disavowed, despite producing substantial cultural impact. The quest for recognition thus reveals the tensions between grassroots creativity and institutional gatekeeping.

7.5.2. Creator Recognition

Content creators navigate a dual economy of recognition: one driven by audience metrics and another by industry legitimacy. Success may be quantified through views, likes, and subscriber counts, but true legitimacy is often conferred through collaborations, platform features, or recognition from game developers.

Multiple content creators were announced as featuring in the game *Cyberpunk 2077* as quest giving characters such as Alanah Pearce, Jesse Cox and Cohn Carnage (GOG.com, 2020). Fan reaction to the creator's inclusion was universally positive within their respective fan communities, with fans eager to hunt them down when the game was eventually released. The inclusion of the creators in the game serves to recognise their status as influential content creators while channelling their fans towards buying the game so they can have a kind of in game interaction with them.

At the same time, creators operate within a precarious landscape where algorithm changes or copyright enforcement can abruptly sever access to visibility and income. Recognition is therefore not only a social or cultural currency, but a matter of economic survival.

7.5.3. Developer Recognition Practices

Developers and publishers engage in strategic recognition practices, amplifying certain types of fan labour while ignoring or suppressing others. This includes featuring fan art, promoting influencers, or commissioning creators for promotional partnerships. Recognition is extended as a form of soft control, creating an incentive for fans to align with corporate norms and risk aversion.

Toby Fox was happy to let fans do what they want with his Undertale IP until the game reached a level of success whereby he had to put out a set of guidelines specifying what kind of fan works are allowed to be sold under certain circumstances so it wouldn't threaten his Trademark; "When in doubt, if hand-made and few, it's OK. If mass-produced and machine/factory made, it's not OK." (Fox, 2016).

However, failure to adequately acknowledge or respect fan contributions, especially during moments of controversy or exploitative monetisation, can lead to fan backlash and reputational damage. Recognition, then, is a key site of negotiation in the fan–developer relationship, shaping not only cultural legitimacy but the long-term sustainability of fan engagement.

7.6. Summary

The Orbital Fandom Framework offers a structured lens for understanding the layered, relational, and asymmetrical flows of value that define contemporary videogame fandoms. By mapping how value is generated, circulated, and recognised across fans, creators, and developers, the framework highlights the complex interplay of affect, labour, and infrastructure. The framework therefore does not treat value as singular or purely economic, but as a multi-layered process that connects perception, production, and structural recognition. It underscores the need for more equitable and transparent practices in recognising fan contributions and suggests that the future of fandom lies in negotiated collaboration rather than unidirectional extraction. This model lays the groundwork for critical reflections on platform capitalism, participatory culture, and the evolving contours of fan power in the digital age.

Chapter 8.

Conclusion: Contributions, Ethical Reflections, and Future Directions

8.1. Introduction

This chapter begins with a series of personal and scholarly reflections on time, considering how temporality has shaped the research process, the artefacts produced, and the broader themes examined throughout the thesis. It then outlines the key contributions of the study, emphasising how the research advances current understandings within its field; whether through the introduction of new conceptual frameworks, methodological approaches, or design-oriented insights. Finally, the chapter looks ahead, suggesting possible directions for future research. These include both speculative lines of inquiry and more concrete next steps that build upon the insights and limitations of the present study.

8.2. Reflections on Time

As this research has unfolded over the course of seven years, partly due to an extended period of medical leave, it has taken on a quasi-longitudinal quality. While this extended timeframe was not methodologically planned it, it is difficult to ignore the shifts that occurred within the videogame and secondary content industries during this period. These developments have inevitably shaped the context of the thesis.

When I started this research, I regarded Let's Players and Livestreamers as having roughly equal influence on the landscape of orbital fandom. However, it has become increasingly evident that livestreamers have assumed a more dominant role. This shift can be partly attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to widespread lockdowns and a significant increase in online media consumption. During this period, watch time for livestreaming surged, as audience sought real-time content and social interaction while confined to their homes. Although viewing figures have since declined from their 2020 peak, they established a new baseline for digital engagement that firmly positioned livestreamers as central figures in the online content creation. This is not to

suggest that Let's Players are unimportant, just that they play a role to a lesser degree than livestreamers have become irrelevant; rather, their role has become comparatively diminished, as their less frequent, non-interactive uploads tend to attract a different form of engagement.

Another development that has reshaped the media landscape is the rise of TikTok. When this research was first conceived, TikTok was not a significant platform within videogame fandoms. However, its rapid growth in 2019 and 2020, accelerated by pandemic-related lockdowns, transformed it into a key site for short-form content sharing. Although this thesis does not directly examine TikTok-based orbital fandom, it is worth acknowledging their presence. Entire clipping ecosystems now exist on the platform, whereby fans post short excerpts of livestreamed or recorded videogame content, sometimes without the content creator's direct involvement on the platform. Additionally, cosplay performances and VTuber-related content have a significant foothold on TikTok, further diversifying the modes of fan engagement.

VTubers, in particular, represent another area of dramatic growth that has influenced the trajectory of this research. When I began my fieldwork, VTubers were a relatively niche phenomenon, but their visibility increased markedly from 2019 onwards. Initially centred on gameplay, the VTuber ecosystem has since diversified significantly. While some VTubers continue to focus on games, others now engage in a wide range of content that does not involve gaming at all. Perhaps most notably, the VTuber identity has evolved beyond its early association with the Japanese idol model, which emphasised purity and modesty. Increasingly, VTubers openly inhabit dual roles blending the personas of videogame streamers and even online sex workers known as "LewdTubers". This shift reflects not only changing audience expectations but also broader transformations in platform culture and identity performance.

It is also important to acknowledge the temporal boundaries imposed by the completion of the literature review. As the field of game studies, fan studies, and platform analysis continues to evolve rapidly, several relevant scholarly works have been published after the review was finalised. While these new contributions fall outside the scope of direct engagement within the body of this thesis, their emergence affirms the growing scholarly interest in themes such as fan labour, platform governance, and the socio-economic dynamics of videogame content creation. The ongoing development of

this literature highlights the continued relevance of the concerns raised in this thesis and points to fertile ground for future research building on the concept of orbital fandom.

In light of these developments, it is important to note that the analytical lens offered in this thesis was shaped by the landscape as it evolved. While not all emerging trends could be explored in full, these shifts underscore the need for ongoing research that remains attentive to the rapidly changing terrain of platformed fandoms.

8.3. Revisiting the Research Questions

The contributions to knowledge offered by this thesis can be understood in relation to the primary research question and sub-questions outlined in the abstract. These questions guided the study's exploration of *orbital fandom* and the evolving dynamics between fans, developers, and platforms within contemporary videogame cultures.

The primary research question guiding this thesis:

What is the relationship between videogame developers/publishers and value creation of orbital fandom?

The thesis offers a comprehensive examination of the reciprocal, and at times fraught relationship between developers and orbital fandoms. It explores how fan contributions such as Let's plays, fan art, and fan fiction, generate cultural, social and economic value of games and franchises. While developers often benefit from these contributions, there are few formal mechanisms in place to acknowledge or compensate the fans whose labour sustains them. This relationship is further complicated by issues surrounding intellectual property and the informal, often precarious nature of fan labour. The thesis highlights the tension between developers' desire to maintain control over their IP and the value-generating practices of fans, revealing how fan engagement can significantly extend the lifespan of a game or franchise.

The following sub-questions further structure the thesis's contribution:

(a) what constitutes the value creation of orbital fandom?

This research identifies several intersecting forms of value creation by orbital fandoms, including cultural significance, social capital, and economic impact. Through a close

analysis of fan labour, playbour, and fan-generated content, such as Let's Plays, remix videos, fan art, and performances, it demonstrates how fans reinterpret and recontextualise game texts in ways that contribute to the game's broader cultural footprint. The role of platforms such as YouTube and Twitch is examined in particular, showing how they facilitate the circulation of fan content and expand the reach to a game's influence well beyond its original release context.

(b) what are the effects of orbital fandom value flow on their respective fandoms?

This thesis further investigated how flows of value within fandoms shape community dynamics. It considers how particular fans may gain visibility or influence based on their proximity to developers or the volume of their creative output. In doing so, it explores the emergence of informal hierarchies within fan communities. The study also reflects on the role of parasocial relationships, where emotionally invested fans engage deeply with creators despite the one-side nature of such interactions. These relationships can foster strong fan loyalty but may also raise ethical corners, particularly when fans offer unpaid labour or financial support with little recognition or reciprocity. Controversies such as copyright takedowns (e.g., DMCA enforcement) are also addressed, revealing how legal interventions can destabilise fan communities and their long-term sustainability.

(c) how can a theoretical framework of this relationship help videogame designers, developers and publishers cherish these fan contributions to improve their fan relationships?

This thesis offers the foundations of a theoretical framework needed to support a more ethical and constructive engagement with fan communities. Centring on the concept of orbital fandom, the framework invites a rethinking of how value is generated and exchanged within fan cultures that operate at a remove from the original game text. The concepts of fan labour and playbour provide critical tools for understanding the blurred boundaries between leisure and labour, passion and production. By foregrounding these dynamics, the thesis calls for developers and publishers to recognise fan contributions not as peripheral, but as integral to the success and longevity of contemporary videogame cultures. In doing so, it makes the case for more thoughtful and sustainable approaches to fan-developer relationships, grounded in appreciation, reciprocity, and ethical care.

8.4. Contributions

This thesis makes several contributions to the academic understanding of videogame fandom, particularly in relation to the emergence of orbital fandoms and the dynamics of value within platform-mediated ecosystems. These contributions span conceptual, theoretical, empirical, and practical domains, offering a more comprehensive account of how contemporary fandom operates beyond direct engagement with game texts.

At a conceptual level, this thesis introduces and formalises the notion of orbital fandom, defined as forms of fan engagement that are displaced from the primary game text and reoriented toward secondary anchors such as content creators, communities, and platform-mediated interactions. While these engagements remain derivatively connected to the originating intellectual property, the game itself is no longer the primary site of affective or participatory investment. In doing so, this thesis extends existing models of fandom, which have tended to centre direct engagement with media texts, by accounting for decentralised and layered forms of participation that emerge through derivative content and mediated interaction.

Building on this conceptual foundation, the thesis develops the Orbital Fandom Framework, which provides a structured model for analysing how value is generated, circulated, and recognised across fans, content creators, developers, and platforms. By distinguishing between cultural, social, and monetary forms of value, and by tracing how these values move unevenly between different actors, the framework offers a systematic approach to understanding the relational and asymmetrical nature of contemporary fan ecosystems. In particular, the inclusion of recognition as a distinct analytical dimension highlights how value is not only produced and exchanged, but also selectively legitimised, made visible, or withheld within systems shaped by platform governance and corporate control.

The thesis further contributes to theoretical discussions of digital labour and participatory culture by demonstrating how fan labour within orbital fandoms operates under conditions of uneven recognition and reward. Drawing on and extending the concept of playbour, the research shows that fan activities, while often undertaken voluntarily and framed as leisure, contribute significant cultural, social, and economic value to the videogame industry. However, these contributions are not consistently

acknowledged or compensated, revealing structural imbalances between fans, creators, and developers. In this respect, the thesis advances existing debates by situating fan labour within a broader system of platform-mediated value extraction and governance.

Relatedly, the thesis offers a refined understanding of parasocial relationships as a central mechanism within orbital fandoms. Rather than treating parasociality solely as an affective or psychological phenomenon, this research demonstrates how such relationships function as a key driver of engagement, value generation, and monetisation within platformed environments. By linking emotional investment to patterns of participation and financial support, the thesis positions parasociality as structurally embedded within the circulation of value in contemporary videogame fandom.

Empirically, the thesis provides a multi-perspective analysis of videogame fandom through a combination of stakeholder interviews and a participant journaling study. This dual approach captures both creator-facing and viewer-facing dimensions of fandom, offering insight into how value is experienced, produced, and interpreted across different positions within the ecosystem. The stakeholder interviews illuminate issues of creative labour, recognition, and professionalisation, while the journaling study foregrounds the everyday practices, motivations, and affective rhythms that sustain fan engagement. Together, these methods contribute a more holistic and grounded account of orbital fandom as both a lived experience and a structural phenomenon.

In addition to its theoretical and empirical contributions, the thesis offers practical implications for developers and industry stakeholders. By demonstrating how value is generated beyond direct gameplay, the research suggests that more effective and ethical forms of engagement with fan communities require recognising the broader ecosystems of creators, spectators, and community participants who contribute to a game's ongoing visibility and cultural relevance. This includes reconsidering how fan labour is acknowledged, how platform systems shape participation, and how intellectual property frameworks can both enable and constrain creative practice.

Completely, the thesis contributes to ongoing discussions of inclusive design by proposing a broader understanding of what it means to design for videogame culture. Rather than focusing solely on players and in-game experience, this research highlights the importance of designing for the wider participatory environment in which games are

embedded. This includes considering how systems, tools, and policies support not only players, but also the creators and communities that sustain a game's extended lifecycle through mediated engagement and cultural production.

Finally, these contributions offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the shifting dynamics of videogame fandom in the platform era. By integrating conceptual innovation, theoretical development, and empirical insight, this thesis advances the study of fan cultures and provides a foundation for future research into the complex relationships between fans, creators, developers, and platforms.

8.5. Confirmation of Contributions

This thesis has fulfilled all the primary research objectives and contributions outlined at the outset. It successfully introduced and formalised the concept of *orbital fandom*, offering a new theoretical framework to capture decentralised forms of fan engagement oriented around content creators and derivative works, rather than direct attachment to videogame texts. It developed a comprehensive model of value generation, circulation, and recognition within these fan ecosystems, tracing the flow of cultural, social, and monetary value across fans, creators, developers, and platforms. The thesis critically examined the structural conditions underpinning fan labour, drawing attention to issues of precarity, platform governance, and the asymmetries of platform capitalism. It built upon existing concepts such as playbour and parasociality, adapting them to the distinctive context of orbital fandoms, and incorporated interdisciplinary perspectives from fan studies, media studies, platform studies, game studies, and digital labour theory. Practical insights were offered for developers and industry stakeholders, highlighting the importance of recognising and ethically engaging with fan contributions. Ethical concerns regarding fan exploitation, parasocial dynamics, and platform influence were addressed reflexively throughout the research. Furthermore, the findings were grounded both theoretically and empirically, through qualitative analysis of stakeholder interviews and participant journaling studies. In fulfilling these aims, the thesis contributes original conceptual, empirical, and critical insights to the academic study of videogame fandoms in the platform era.

8.6. Future Research

This thesis has highlighted several avenues for future research that are necessary to extend the conceptual, empirical, and applied dimensions of orbital fandom studies. As the digital media and gaming ecosystems continue to evolve, the configurations of value, labour, and recognition within fan–developer dynamics remain subject to ongoing transformation. Future studies could benefit from a more sustained, comparative analysis of fandoms situated across different platform ecologies, especially those that have emerged since the completion of this research, including TikTok-native fandoms and algorithmically mediated short-form content networks.

One area warranting deeper investigation is the longitudinal impact of fan labour monetisation, particularly in relation to creator burnout, changing audience expectations, and platform policy shifts. As fan creators navigate increasingly professionalised landscapes, their creative autonomy and affective labour become subject to both market demands and algorithmic visibility regimes. Studying these pressures over time may yield insights into how content sustainability and platform loyalty are negotiated.

Additionally, the intersection of fan labour and AI-driven moderation technologies presents a pressing site of ethical and infrastructural concern. As automated systems are increasingly employed to detect, suppress, or monetise fan-produced content, questions arise regarding fairness, algorithmic transparency, and the unintended consequences of such governance structures on marginalised or non-commercial fan expressions. Future research might critically interrogate the mechanisms by which these technologies mediate access to visibility, recognition, and revenue.

Another priority area involves the legal frameworks surrounding fan production, particularly as intellectual property rights continue to be enforced unevenly across global jurisdictions. Further interdisciplinary work between legal scholars, game studies researchers, and practitioners is needed to explore how doctrines such as fair use, transformative work, and derivative authorship are being interpreted and contested within the context of gaming platforms and community-generated content.

While this thesis is grounded in videogame contexts, the concept of orbital fandom has broader applicability to other forms of contemporary media culture

characterised by platform-mediated engagement and distributed participation. In such environments, audiences increasingly orient themselves not solely around a primary text, but around creators, communities, and circulating forms of content that exist at varying degrees of remove from the original source. Similar dynamics can be observed in influencer cultures, streaming ecosystems, and transmedia franchises, where engagement is often anchored in personalities, formats, or aesthetic styles rather than a single originating work. In these contexts, value is likewise generated through ongoing cycles of production, circulation, and recognition, shaped by platform infrastructures and audience interaction. The concept of orbital fandom therefore provides a useful framework for analysing how cultural, social, and economic value is produced beyond the boundaries of a central text, particularly in conditions where visibility, algorithmic mediation, and community participation play a defining role. At the same time, the transferability of the framework requires careful consideration of the specific affordances, norms, and power structures of different media forms. As such, while the findings of this thesis offer a foundation for extending the concept beyond videogames, further research is needed to examine how orbital dynamics manifest across diverse cultural contexts.

From a methodological standpoint, future studies might also benefit from extending the geographical and linguistic scope of fandom research. While this thesis centres primarily on English-speaking and East Asian digital cultures, comparative studies involving underrepresented regional or linguistic communities would allow for more robust testing of the Orbital Fandom Framework's applicability and variability across contexts.

Finally, there is considerable potential for industry-academic collaboration in co-developing models that formalise the recognition of fan contributions. Such partnerships could help address long-standing tensions between user creativity and corporate control, while offering sustainable pathways for ethical engagement, participatory design, and shared value creation in games culture. These directions suggest that the study of orbital fandom remains not only timely but increasingly vital, as questions of value, visibility, and governance continue to shape the future of participatory culture under platform capitalism.

8.7. Acknowledgement of Limitations

While this thesis offers a comprehensive analysis of orbital fandoms within videogame cultures, several limitations must be acknowledged. These relate primarily to the scope of data collection, methodological constraints, and generalisability of findings.

Firstly, the empirical components of the study, namely the stakeholder interviews and journaling study, were subject to inherent limitations in participant diversity and response depth. Despite efforts to secure a broad range of voices across creative, professional, and fan domains, access to certain high-profile content creators and industry executives proved difficult. As such, some perspectives in particular from larger corporate stakeholders or those embedded within highly commercialised streaming infrastructures remain underrepresented. Similarly, while the journaling study captured rich insights into everyday viewing practices, the self-reporting method limited the depth and consistency of data. Some participants submitted minimal responses or failed to complete the full set of entries, reducing the comparative granularity of certain findings.

Furthermore, the decision to employ qualitative methodologies, such as virtual ethnography and auto-ethnographic reflection, provided nuanced and contextual insights but introduced challenges related to researcher subjectivity. As an aca-fan, my positionality inevitably shaped the selection, interpretation, and presentation of data. While reflexive practices were employed to mitigate potential bias, the embeddedness of the researcher within the studied communities must be recognised as both a strength and a constraint.

In addition, the evolving nature of platform ecosystems and digital fandom presents challenges for longitudinal validity. This study captures a specific temporal snapshot of fan–developer relations, platform governance, and content production dynamics, primarily between 2019 and 2024. Given the rapid pace of change in the gaming and streaming industries, future developments like algorithmic shifts, monetisation models, or corporate policy changes, may alter the landscape in ways that render some findings less applicable over time.

This thesis also engaged with legal and economic frameworks to contextualise the governance and value flows underpinning fan labour within platformed videogame cultures. While these areas were essential to understanding how fan practices are shaped by structures such as copyright law and monetisation systems, the analysis remains interpretive rather than technical, due to the absence of specialised legal or economic training. Although relevant scholarly literature was consulted, future research would benefit from collaboration with legal and economic experts to provide a more granular and authoritative examination of the regulatory and financial mechanisms that structure fan participation.

Lastly, while the thesis proposes a generalisable framework for understanding value flows within orbital fandoms, its empirical foundation is largely centred on English-speaking and East Asian digital cultures, particularly within Hong Kong, the UK, and North America. As such, cultural specificities and regional variances in fan practice, legal norms, and platform infrastructures may not be fully accounted for. Future research could usefully expand the geographical and linguistic scope of the inquiry to test the applicability of the Orbital Fandom Framework in diverse global contexts.

In acknowledging these limitations, the thesis also highlights opportunities for future work to build upon its findings, refining and expanding the analytical tools presented herein.

8.8. Summary

This thesis has critically examined the relational dynamics between videogame developers, content creators, and fan communities, with particular attention to the decentralised forms of engagement characterised as orbital fandoms. Through the combined application of theoretical frameworks from fan studies, platform studies, and digital labour theory, and through the empirical methods of virtual ethnography, auto-ethnographic reflection, and stakeholder interviews, the study has articulated how fans contribute social, cultural, and economic value across multiple layers of the gaming ecosystem.

The concept of orbital fandom has been developed to describe a specific mode of participatory culture that emerges one or more steps removed from the original game

text. These fandoms are shaped not only by affective investments in games themselves but by interactions with content creators, remix communities, and platform infrastructures. The thesis has outlined how these fandoms generate, circulate, and negotiate value; often in conditions shaped by platform governance and asymmetric power dynamics.

Empirical data from interviews and journaling studies has further illuminated how fans navigate the complexities of visibility, creative labour, parasocial intimacy, and professionalisation. It has demonstrated that while fan practices are often celebrated for their expressiveness and community-building potential, they are also deeply embedded within systems of exploitation, precarity, and corporate control.

In synthesising these findings, the thesis offers the Orbital Fandom Framework as a conceptual tool for understanding the flows of value in digital fan cultures. It underscores the need for more inclusive and reciprocal models of engagement between the industry and its fan communities, and calls for ongoing scholarly attention to the ethical, legal, and structural conditions under which fan labour is produced and recognised.

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Appendices

Select Stakeholder Interview Transcripts

Presented below are a selection of stakeholder interview transcripts displaying the raw data that went into the analysis within this thesis. Maintaining consistency with the data analysis I have redacted the names of each interviewee to maintain consistency among interviewees who requested to remain anonymous. The interview transcripts are presented in their original form, that is transcribed directly from the audio/video recordings with pauses, stutters and repetition included or in the form of responses to interview questions sent via text. Quotes presented within the main body of the thesis have been cleaned up in some certain cases to remove these redundant words or phrasing. In addition, some of the interviewees are not native English speakers, as such certain grammatical or syntax errors remain intact as a true version of their interview answers but should not be used to question their contributions.

Gaming Journalist: Interviewee A (Text Based Interview)

Interviewer: When was the first time you remember feeling attached to a game fandom?

Interviewee A: I think the first time I was really attached to a game fandom was when Guitar Hero launched for PlayStation 2 back in 2006. I became absolutely obsessed with it, playing during most of my free time, and ended up joining an online community centred around it. We'd discuss the charts for the songs, scoring strategies, and (in the days before widespread online gaming and leaderboards) compete for high scores by sending in grainy digital camera photos of our score screens. There were weekly competitions based around sets of songs, and I remember at one time when my dial-up internet failed going round to a friend's house in the middle of the night to upload my

scores on their connection so I wouldn't lose a week's worth of effort by missing the deadline for submission!

Of course, my main game fandom came when I met a group of friends through the Official PlayStation Magazine Facebook group, and we started playing Metal Gear Online together. We tried plenty of other games, but none of them stuck in the way that MGO did, and through that the group known as The Rocket Minions was born. After playing online together for a while our friendships moved into the real world, where we met up for games conventions, trips, holidays, and even a visit to the offices of the Official PlayStation Magazine team in Bath – where I now work! The group also spawned several marriages, though they have both since ended in divorce, and although we have drifted apart somewhat in the years since Metal Gear Online closed down, there are still a few of us who are in regular contact and meet up more than 15 years since The Rocket Minions first got together!

Interviewer: What made you go into game journalism as a career? / How did you become Mr Trophy?

Interviewee A: To be honest, in many ways I stumbled into game journalism through a series of (un)fortunate events! Although I grew up reading lots of gaming magazines, I'd never considered it as a realistic career path and had spent most of my 20s working as an accountant for a quango. I became friendly with a lot of the Official PlayStation Magazine staff while making small reader contributions, and when they launched a Facebook page in the earlier days of social media I helped to moderate the content – this was easier when there were just a few hundred people on the page, current count in 2024 is 1.6 million!

At that time I was regularly posting online about the trials and tribulations I was having while earning trophies in games, which caught the eye of Tim Clark and Dan Dawkins at Future. They were in the process of redesigning the unofficial PSM3 magazine and looking for new features, so had the idea of presenting me as the Mr Trophy character and turning my experiences into a monthly column. They approached me with the idea and I loved it, so I popped down to London for a photoshoot (behind the scenes detail -

the iconic Mr Trophy hats hadn't been printed at that stage, so I wore a blank cap and the name was Photoshopped on afterwards!) and was brought on board as a freelancer, with my first column (LA Noire) appearing in July 2011.

Around that time Future had also contacted me about a role they were recruiting for on behalf of PlayStation – Community Manager for what would later become PlayStation Access – and they wanted to put me forward as their #1 candidate after the voluntary work I had done for them looking after the OPM Facebook group. It sounded great, but it was London-based and at the time the only way I could afford to move there was to take voluntary redundancy from my job at the quango. After Future stalled on the role for several months I reached the deadline with my current job, so bit the bullet and initiated the voluntary redundancy process. A month or so later, PlayStation recruited somebody internally to the role and it disappeared, leaving me potentially unemployed at the end of the year.

Towards the end of the year, Future announced that they were recruiting some new writers, and with nothing to lose at that stage I put in an application, even though writing the recently launched Mr Trophy column was my only official game journalism experience. Through several interviews and assignments I managed to convince them that I would be a good fit, and as I walked to the pub in late December 2011 having just finished my final day at the quango, I got a call from Future offering me a job! I initially started in January 2012 specialising in guides for the Computer and Video Games website plus PSM3 and Xbox World magazines, before moving to the GamesRadar website to become Guides Editor in late 2013, where I still am now!

Mr Trophy featured in every PSM3 from the redesign in July 2011 to the magazine's closure in December 2012, before being resurrected in the Official PlayStation Magazine for another run from late 2013 through to later 2016.

Interviewer: What are your most positive and negative experiences as Mr Trophy?

Interviewee A: A huge positive was just breaking into the industry, and becoming Mr Trophy gave me the opportunity to do that in a way that wouldn't otherwise have been possible for someone without an education/background in journalism. Seeing the sincere

joy that some readers had after receiving their Mr Trophy hat in the post for getting a reader submission featured was also great, and they were a legitimately sought-after item for a while!

It was difficult some months to produce the feature, because I was genuinely playing the games and trying to get the Platinum trophy to write up an authentic experience, and for some games that meant 50+ hours of commitment before I'd even started writing. There was also a very negative period where I was receiving regular abuse and even death threats via messages over the PlayStation Network, after my PSN ID was published in the magazine. I never found the source of those messages, though thankfully after reporting them for a while they eventually ceased.

Interviewer: Have you had any unexpected fan interactions?

Interviewee A: When the Mr Trophy feature was in the magazines I did occasionally get recognised at gaming conventions which was nice – though often I was wearing the Mr Trophy hat at the time which was a bit of a giveaway! Probably the most unexpected interaction I've ever had was when I was working on Future's GTA V O'Clock show, which involved running a weekly GTA Online livestream where viewers could join us for various games and challenges. Rockstar themselves enjoyed our ongoing work on this series, and in 2014 we were invited to take part in an official Rockstar Independence Day livestream - America vs Great Britain The Rematch. This was being commentated on by Lazlow Jones, the voice actor and radio personality who features in many of the GTA games, and for whatever reason he took a real shine to Mr Trophy. We had a fun chat off-air and exchanged several emails, after which I posted off a Mr Trophy cap to New York - and got an email back from Lazlow to say thanks for the hat and that he was wearing it while gaming!

[REDACTED YOUTUBE LINK]

Interviewer: What are your favourite memories from the MGO clan?

Interviewee A: So many great memories of our time playing together as the MGO clan! From the crazy free-for-all battles to the tense stealth suit sneaking, getting annoyed at players who knew how to use the CQC (close quarters combat) moves properly to incapacitate opponents, to making up our own games, leaving 'adult' magazines around the map to distract other players, and posing for silly photographs between rounds. There was a real sense of community when we all came together for those games, in the days when online gaming was nowhere near as prevalent or easy as it is now – I think I'd only recently switched from dial-up to broadband when we got started!

My absolute favourite memory was when the MGO clan got together for one last round of games, before the servers were shut down for good by Konami. At the end we all gathered around as a group, then used the special code in the chat box to make our characters sing the round ending theme as we all stood together saluting. It really was the perfect send off!

Fanfic Writer Turned Game Designer: Interviewee K (Video interview)

Interviewer: OK, we're recording. Thank you for agreeing to this interview. This interview and my research have been cleared by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University Board of Ethics. You have the right to refuse any question you don't want to. You can stop the interview anytime you like. And if there's things that you want to talk about, or if you would prefer to remain anonymous we can anonymise your data. Do consent to the interview?

Interviewee K: Yep.

Interviewer: OK, great. To start with, can you introduce yourself and what you do in your own words?

Interviewee K: So my name is [REDACTED]. I'm a game designer. Yeah. And I regularly like, write for different fandoms.

Interviewer: Tell me about what was the first fandom, that you were majorly involved with.

Interviewee K: Are we Talking about like, sorry. Are we talking about? Like started writing for or like reading about or like just like other than that.

Interviewer: That interacting with other friends and like yeah, being involved with the community.

Interviewee K: So for me I would have. I would have to say Overwatch. I think that was my first like fandom that I was, Regularly, like interacting with others. And Final Fantasy 14.

Interviewer: OK. What drew you to those fandoms?

Interviewee K: Overwatch had, like a large following at the time and like. It was very. It had a lot of fan art and a lot of characters and a lot of like ships, and so I went towards that and then keeping that also got a large following. Yeah. So usually for me, I would say it's the, it's the scale of the fandom and that that would draw me to it like the more fan art or fan picture I see of the particular like fandom or ship. That I'm interested in that I would go. Yeah, I'll, I'll go to it.

Interviewer: OK. What sort of fan works have you produced?

Interviewee K: Fan fiction, fan art. I think those two are about it.

Interviewer: OK. Have you ever purchased a fan works from other like fan members, community members?

Interviewee K: Yes, so I bought. zines. I bought like Fan art. Like, like for example like physical products like plushies. Or yeah.

Interviewer: Why do you want to buy fan made products compared to official products?

Interviewee K: So often official products don't give. The same sort of... They, official products often don't have like the same sort of things as fans particularly want, especially if they're sort of... Like., if the stuff that they make isn't exactly what the fans are looking for, so for example, oh, like. For, example I, I saw a plushie recently I was like, I saw a Disco Elysium plushie that got sold. Like a month or two ago, but this was never, like sold any like plushies or like any, any cute merchandise, whereas a lot, of the fan works that are based around the Disco Elysium, often do have cute aspects to it.

Interviewer: Did any of the frameworks that you produced ever give you like a bump in subscribers or followers, any kind of like increase to your social media?

Interviewee K: Yeah, usually so I cannot like have any traces of like my social media directly tied to my fan works, but usually like the comments on that fan work. For example, I would have more engagement and then I would also engage with that, but only on that particular platform.

Interviewer: Has anyone who has worked on a game in an official capacity like interacted with your fan works?

Interviewee K: No, no, thankfully.

Interviewer: OK, why you say thankfully?

Interviewee K: I would rather be sort of, uh. Actually, no, I wouldn't say rather, but like there is a sort of. Thing where fan works; fans make fan works not for them to Be seen by like, Like the official creators, like for example I think. Like back when, like Sherlock, the BBC show was like very was really famous. They read out like fan fiction like and like, make fun of it. And so I don't think that the people who do right or like or write this fan, Fan, That fiction would want to. Yeah, necessarily showed the original creators or. The like the. Actors work them. Yeah.

Interviewer: For sure. How has, have you had any sort of copyright or legal notices regarding your the work you produce?

Interviewee K: Nope

Interviewer: OK. you've you've got a Disco Elysium tattoo, right?

Interviewee K: Yes,

Interviewer: OK, why did you want to get that tattooed on yourself?

Interviewee K: Because the game was very meaningful to me. So it was very, yeah, it was a personal. Yeah, I wanted to get it so I got it.

Interviewer: Yeah, cool. Has anyone from the fandom ever like commented on it like in public or an event or something?

Interviewee K: Usually like in public. Like if I know someone who likes Disco Elysium, they'll be like, oh, it's just that like. But you know, I, I wouldn't really show off my tattoos online.

Interviewer: OK. And then getting to the end, how has your job affected your relationship with fandom now that you are working in a professional capacity in the game industry?

Interviewee K: To be honest, I don't think it's affected it much, especially because what I do, with my job, is so sort of far removed from what I like write about or what I draw about. And I don't think even if I were to, like, work in an official capacity, like with the fandoms that I was into, I don't think my Fan like my fan works would change in accordance to that.

Interviewer: OK. And then last question is, is there anything that you feel you want to talk about that hasn't been asked about some meaningful fandom and interaction or something like that?

Interviewee K: No, I think that's. All.

Interviewer: OK, that's great. We can end the interview here, then. Thank you very much.

Interviewee V- Content Creator and Sexworker (Video Interview)

Interviewer: Start recording. OK, cool. Thank you so much. For agreeing to this interview, just like to let you know before you start that it has been approved by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University's Ethics Committee, you have the right to refuse any question that you don't want to answer. You have the right to halt the interview at any time that you want. If you want to talk about things but remain on anonymous, you can. Let me know and I can specifically make you anonymous for specific parts. Do you consent to the interview?

Interviewee V: Yes, I consent.

Interviewer: Great. Thank you. First, could you please introduce yourself and what you do in your own words?

Interviewee V: OK, my name is [REDACTED]. I am content creator and also I have been doing various kind of sex works since 2016. I started off from doing as a kind of web Cam, like Cam girl and then eventually starting to do like kind of like on the screen for feel like a production like a small, you know, small company. Like 4 Chambers and then it eventually it just end up, you know, getting into a couple of bigger productions such as the Cyberpunk uh production. And as of right now, I'm currently just doing OnlyFans.

Interviewer: OK. How did you get involved with the cyberpunk production? Are you a gamer? Did you know about Cyberpunk beforehand?

Interviewee V: Yeah. My partner at that time and I were gamers and we are aware of the game and it's kind of interesting the way I get into that role. Uh, of the production is that uh. I was kind of looking into more like trying out on like shooting with bigger production company and I kind of just asking like weaving into like. What's interesting is I was on like a zoom meeting seminar. Uh. During the pandemic is hosted by a couple of like experienced sex worker in, in the industry in LA and just helping out other sex worker, especially BIPOC sex worker during the pandemic or like especially like the current. The stage of like how the stage is, how the US and various places start censoring pornography online, by just teaching how to build your own website. And then I just kind of asked the questions like, OK. Like it's kind of not feasible for me to be able to just build our own paying system and own website by myself, but as of right now, I can still try to do production. Is there. I'm currently living in Vancouver BC. And there is not really any like production company, stand alone, production company in that field. You know, for me, the next, the closest other places that that have, like big production, obviously LA and you have those, those people just help me out to kind of hook me up. I was like ohh you should contact this person and I, I did contact to the local, like, Sex worker, who also kind of have a little start up on her own for her uh on production. And from that she is like, kind of like has relationships with other production company in LA such as Burning Angels and like same as the you know the company that I work for, VR Banger. And so I just have like, a meeting with her, and she's saying that if she ever have any, you know, role that is fit for. My for me like cause personally I'm really heavily tattoo and all those things. So it's really hard for me to get like a role usually, you know, like a mainstream porn. So was very specific, but she was help. She was like trying her best to kind of help me out, which I'm really grateful for. And yeah, I think like 2 weeks or so later, I got a call and saying like, hey, this company wanna do a cyberpunk parody porn. Are you familiar with the game? And I said, yeah, I'm familiar. The game is going to come up soon and. Yeah, it just like perfect fit. It just happens that like that.

Interviewer: Great. How was your experience when the parody was actually released?

Interviewee V: My experience, it's kind of interesting because, a lot of people were like. Shock of like Ohh it's already you know the parody released before the game release and then later on the the game has so much issue. It's just kind of like a flop. So is this like a purgatory? It's like ohh this is. This I of my own. The parody is great and then, but

the game itself does not support, you know, the hype of the parody. But also like seeing online of like how people are joking. It's like ohh, you know, the parody at least doesn't glitch compared, compared to the actual game. So. So yeah, I it it's a funny thing. It's like it's it's kind of like the reaction to the mixture like humour. Like collecting, like why? Why would she do parody of the game? That. Is end up being, you know, bad at the beginning or, you know, just kind of people just looking just like and not a cheesy parody. You. Know cheesy thing that like the porn industry do just to grab money.

Interviewer: Did you gain, like, a noticeable amount of fans or anything? When It came out?

Interviewee V: Oh yeah, absolutely. I wasn't really like super big to start off the following, especially on Twitter. And I think with the cyberpunk I gain, at least like, over 20 K follower and also I was so surprised. But. I someone end up making a Reddit page of me. Which I, I never thought of that is gained to that, you know of that popularity makes it to the point that someone actually made a Reddit page for me.

Interviewer Cool. That's really interesting. Would you say that that's it's your most recognisable work or people still recognise you for?

Interviewee V: I would say. Yeah, for, for like a for like majority people, yes. And I think for I also like for even right now through like my career sometimes like. Other people would mention my other work, which I think is also kind of recognised. I did a production with Erica Lust, which I think her company based, based in Barcelona. And it's more kind of like a artsy feminist porn company. So I got recognised on that too. So I say both, both of my work are like, on par, like pretty almost the same like popularity game, yeah.

Interviewer: That's great. What sort of interactions did you get from fans like on Twitter after the parody was released? Like specifically, did you get any from like Cyberpunk fans? I'm wondering.

Interviewee V: Funny I. Surprisingly, not really like I think people start like saw my cyberpunk porn and then just wanna get curious and not wanna actually know what kind of like content I create. So the interaction is when they get on Twitter they just basically. Going through the other like stuff that I actually do and from that I get comments, I either you know they you know they, they like my. Like work that I always do, or they just kind

of ask like ohh when are you doing more of these kind of production? This kind of thing, but big production job is kind of hard to come by, especially for Canadian performer because we don't have like. As I said, we don't really have the company here. A big company here compared to the US so majority of like the worker like it's either has to get like a US like working visa or just end up have to move down to the state. Yeah.

Interviewer: I understand, did you see the developers from the game, had tweeted about your parody?

Interviewee V: Yes, I did. Someone show it to me actually.

Interviewer: How? How did that make you feel?

Interviewee V: Yes. It's actually kind of funny. I was like, wow, that's that was quick. Like I like because majority like parody porn usually just went under the radar, you know? Or like, you know. Developers or people who actually make the actual thing just don't really care much. I think they just kind of expect eventually someone. Yeah. So I'm yeah. So I'm just kind of shocked that like it get a little bit recognised and, and also at least it's funny. It's like a little bit of, like a promotion as I hear it, it's like. Someone already made a porn version of it, and I'm sure, sure you guys wanna see it, those kind of things.

Interviewer: That's awesome. So those are most of the key questions that I really wanted to ask you. Is there anything that you want to mention about your experience yourself that maybe I haven't asked about that you think is important?

Interviewee V: Umm. I would say not really, but like if you want. If you're interested of like into the nitty, nitty gritty of like you know I, I think a lot of people have like misconception of like shooting production like that like big production like that it's just. You know, all funs and games because you basically just having sex with another person. It's a very honestly is a very, like, stressful experience, just like acting like it's literally acting and, and it's kind of like fun to also like seeing because like, I think it's, it's like the first like completely different thing that a company may even though they make VR porn, but it's like specifically, specifically theme gaming theme is, yeah. For them is a little bit, lounging on their end, too. I we, got, I got the script a week before my shooting. And there's so much error in the script that like we I couldn't even start like remembering the script I have to rewrite the whole script and then the second day is the day that I, I

have I have to start like learning all, all the all the sentence and all the phrases and during the production like we would. Kind of like. Look up and do more research and like just seeing like the promotion of like the gaming you know for like promotion photos for a game and just figuring out like. You know, makeup, how to be mimicking like close to it, cause you cause it's so such a specific thing like cyber punk. There's so much so many, like cyberpunk, like movies and books and games. But because we've targeted such a specific thing, we want to make sure that it's remotely close to, you know. What the game would be, so we also have to like talk about like wardrobe and just kind of like make sure that it looks almost you know similar to the game itself. So it doesn't be like just someone you know the just randomly slap into a thing and just force people to believe that. So it is related to that game. Yeah.

Interviewer: Great if this is a little too specific. Do you remember when you were doing the research? Did you use the cosplay guides? Because I remember they released cosplay guides like before the game came out. Or was it just like promotional stuff?

Interviewee V: Just the promotional stuff, OK, but yeah.

Interviewer: No, that's that's that's great. Awesome. That's great. Thank you so much. I think 1 maybe not specifically about Cyberpunk, were you involved in any other gaming parodies since or just this one?

Interviewee V: Just this one for now. I think as I as I mentioned, it's like I think my look is very specific. So it's yeah. So I just like ohh if they happen. OK. If the if the company happens like things my appearance, you know, fits certain things. They they will just send me message, yeah.

Interviewer: Great. Cool. Thank you so much. I'll end the interview here. OK, I'll stop the recording.

Select Journaling Study Results

Presented below are a selection of the journaling studies based on their submission to the google form participants were provided with. Names have been anonymised to maintain consistency with the rest of the thesis. There were many questions the Journaling Study participants were asked to fill in each day, here are presented results of five answers from each qualitative question. Answers are presented as submitted to the original form, as a result spelling, grammatical or syntax errors may exist. In addition, some of the interviewees are not native English speakers, these errors do not compromise or invalidate their contribution to the study.

Briefly describe why you watched these five pieces of content first?

"I subscribed most of these video's owners on YouTube so I can see these video on the main page. One of the videos is recommended by YouTube and just because the title attracts me."

"I watched the first video since it appeared at the home page, while I wanted to spectate horror gameplay so I watched the second one"

"These are the most frequently played games."

"I subscribed to this youtuber so I would see his videos when I am free on youtube"

"[1. My two favourite Vtubers, watch every video of both of them]"

Briefly describe what you saw in the video content today

"Both videos are maps of Minecraft which they have different topics, the first one is about escaping from a kingdom by finishing small tasks and the players counted marks to identify who is the winner by finding coins in the map. The second one is a horror map based on the horror game Granny, which the author of the map made his/her own

version by using the character Peppa pig. The players' speed is reduced and this made the game more exciting when Peppa pig is chasing the players.”

“I saw some YouTubers focus on bringing high quality gameplay to the audiences and some focus on creating entertaining atmosphere to the audiences.”

“Some high elo LOL matches, and some TFT autochess. For English content I've watched some warzone edited gameplay”

“The first one is a let's play video – a group of people playing Among Us together. The second one is a group of real people acting like they are playing Among Us. The third one is a review of Just Dance 2021, comparing the experience on Switch and PS4, but focusing on Switch. The 4th one is a review of Watch Dogs 3, introducing the plot, gameplay and his personal experience. The last one listed 20 ‘copycat’ games.”

“For the first video, the game is about destroying the city by different means, for example nuclear bombs and black holes. The black hole keeps sucking the whole city and this is satisfying.”

Describe events from today's video content that made a special impression on you

“The youtuber wireless keyboard ran out of battery but still killed one player.”

“The plays in League of Legends in the first video impressed me. The ways he reaches the objectives are fascinating. Also, the silly interactions in the fifth video between YouTubers impressed me as well.”

“Videos about Rainbow Six Siege are mainly showing their skills to win the games, and the YouTubers in one of those videos perform an alternative playstyle to the audiences which made a special impression on me. Also, the exaggerated reactions given by the YouTubers keep my focus on his video.”

“[5. Kanae has spent 150,000~180,000 yen for Gacha in Genshin]”

"In the first video, the YouTuber's laugh and screaming is contagious. Some of the games mentioned in the last video were even before I was born."

Describe your thoughts and emotions related to these events

"Relaxing and delightful"

"I felt entertained by watching those funny YouTubers interacting with his friends (other Youtubers) and I learnt more for playing Rainbow Six, mainly skills, from the professional players."

"I like the players yell YESSS!! after they have achieved a satisfying score, and the feeling of teamwork is really nice. I remember the good days in Year 1 that I can always go to game arcade with my friends and play happily in the morning without worrying schoolwork, but for now, some of them are really busy with their school work and part time jobs D:(I am one of them though), one of them are not really interested in arcade music games anymore, and one of them is not in Hong Kong, also MaiMai has a new version now and these strange scores is not included in the new version. I want to play MaiMai with them again and I hope my friends would be more free during the semester break."

"Well, I think it is great and fun to see player discussing the story and see what other interpretation towards the game. "There are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes" Actually, I start thinking to play dark souls series..."

"I love memes. They always make me laugh. These days there are more and more game memes, some of which are really humorous and creative. The Among Us meme changes my attitude to this game. I turn to be more positive about it. I see Among Us videos as long as I open YouTube. Sometimes I feel really tired to be exposed to Among Us content all the time, especially when I don't play it. But this meme is so cute, and I think there has to be some reason for its popularity. Maybe I should try it again sometime. I guess it would be better if I play it with friends instead of strangers."

