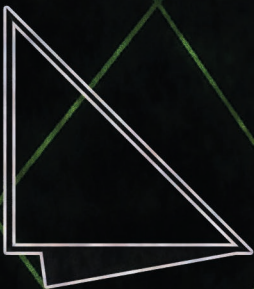


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# Identity and Gaming

Freya Greiss



[papergames.de](http://papergames.de)



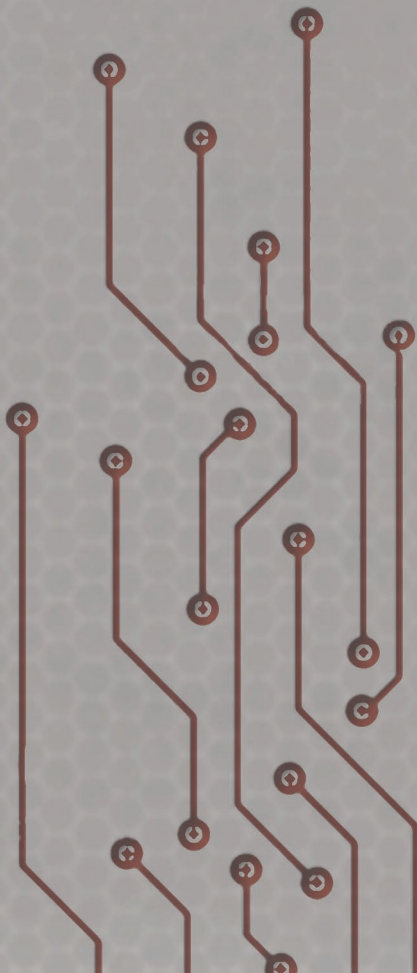


# Identity and Gaming:

## How my father is constructing his gamer identity through his gaming website

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# 1) Introduction to 'gaming and identity'

"Hence, in exploring gamer identity, we study ways in which a medium offers opportunities for identification that are atypical for most media forms" (*De Grove et al. 2015: 347*).

As this citation shows, the field of gaming is closely linked to the process of building identities (*Taylor 2006, Dietkow 2023*). The main focus of this article is on how gamers construct and develop their digital identities. This is linked to the following question: How do gamers represent themselves in the gaming world? For my research, I want to focus on my father as my subject: He is a gamer, as is my brother, and so I grew up with gaming as a lifestyle at home, which I do not share at all. Although I learned from my father, his friends and my younger brother that gaming can be a creative hobby that opens up new worlds far from everyday reality, I was never tempted to take it up. Additionally, my father has run the website *papergames.de*, dedicated to role-playing games, since 2004. On it, he shares his own game instructions and storybooks about different worlds and scenarios in which the game could take place, all for free.

I have always admired his passion for creating new stories and his love of sharing them with the world of gaming. Since I have helped him several times with choosing new images or colors for layouts, I am very familiar with the website. On the other hand, growing up with gaming in my family showed me the huge impact it can have on your life. It becomes an important part of your identity. Growing up with a gamer father who lives in two worlds, the real one and the online one, was perfectly normal for me all my life. However, I never thought about how my father represented himself in the digital space or what this might mean to him.

## 1.1) Relevance of the topic

The topic seems highly interesting and relevant due to the fact that gaming has become a world-wide hobby and lifestyle (*Muriel & Crawford 2018*). My personal motivation stems from my biographical background: my father is a gamer, and I grew up seeing the significant role that gaming played in his life. The aim is to understand how he constructs his gamer identity (*or perhaps multiple identities*) through his gaming website. Additionally, no research has been conducted on the website *papergames.de* this far. This makes it a very interesting research object, especially given my easy access to the field.

These contextual information and personal thoughts lead directly to the following research questions:

- How does the website *papergames.de* construct gamer identity, and what specific goals does its publisher aim to achieve?
- Is there only one gamer identity for the publisher of *papergames.de*, or are there several?





## 2) Theoretical framework

The theoretical concepts of gaming and identity are complex and multifaceted and can be closely linked. The significance of these factors for this research will be shown in the further text.

### 2.1) Identity and Gaming

In this research, we explore the theoretical field of an increasingly popular video game culture. Following on from Muriel & Crawford (2018: 16), we are currently observing the process of the “videoludification of society”. Nardi (2010: 7) describe video games as a “new visual-performative medium”. Further the author states: “This new medium orients human activity in a stimulating visual environment that makes possible a release of creativity and a sense of empowerment in conditions of autonomy, sociality, and positive reward” (Nardi 2010: 7).

Dietkow (2023) writes that the individual meaning of what makes a gamer can vary greatly. This is why self-identification is often the most accurate way of determining who considers themselves a gamer. More aspects than just the time spent playing should be considered when defining a gamer (Dietkow 2013: 21). According to Cwil & Howe (2020: 796), gender influences self-identification, with men being more likely than women to identify as gamers. One characteristic that distinguishes gamers from non-gamers is spending a lot of time playing online games.

Dietkow (2023) discusses the social construction of identity in gaming, stating that, in the digital age, identity is formed using “kits of cultural tools that people utilize to define and understand themselves and others” (Dietkow 2023: 23). In the digital age, identity is largely constructed through ‘proficiency’, whereby individuals define their digital self based on how they are perceived by a general peer who shares their tastes and values. This process is similar to identity validation (Dietkow 2023: 27). Dietkow (2023) categorizes gamers into two groups: passive and engaged gamers. Passive gamers view gaming as an enjoyable pastime, generating meaning from other areas of life. They are not usually associated with gaming because it is just part of their life, not their lifestyle. In contrast, engaged gamers are deeply involved in gaming, because it holds crucial meaning for them. Also, they understand gaming language and cultural references. This group can be divided further: Play-oriented engaged gamers prioritize enjoying social interaction. On the other hand, game-oriented engaged gamers are driven by winning and goal achievement (Dietkow 2023: 30). Yee (2014) suggests that avatars are an integral part of a player’s identity within the game, enabling them to express and experiment with their sense of self. Moreover, a player’s personality traits can directly impact their in-game actions and preferences. The author refers to Richard Bartle’s categorization of gamers as achievers, socialisers, killers and explorers. Three further types of gaming motivation are then described: achievement, social interaction and immersion (Yee 2014: 29). These categories will be important for understanding the interviewee’s position within gaming in the analysis and interpretation of results chapter.

In De Grove et al. (2015: 347) gamer identity is socially constructed as well, highlighting “cultural capital” (knowledge, ownership, time spent on specific games) and “social capital” (opportunities to discuss games). The experience of being a gamer is shaped by factors such as play frequency, game genre, demographics and the social context; male and younger players generally identify more strongly as gamers (De Grove et al. 2015: 351). Taylor (2006) also mentions players seeing themselves as creators. Scholes et al. (2022: 165) highlights the social aspect in relation to peer influence, which is tied to gaming preferences and a sense of belonging to a community. As one eight-year-old boy explained in their research: “If you have a certain game then you’re a certain person” (Scholes et al. 2022: 163). So, the boundaries between one’s offline and online identities become blurred because, in this context, identity is fluid and extends across a variety of avatars and gaming experiences (Jenson et al. 2015). In conclusion, Taylor (2006: 19) describes it as follows: “What happens in virtual worlds often is just as real, just as meaningful, to participants.”



## 2.2) About websites

Websites are very dynamic and linked in terms of content, for example as an online publication that is connected to a specific communicative network. In addition, the website is described as a networked and multimodal “online communication”, which is made up of various electronic texts (Meier 2016: 411). A website can therefore be regarded as an online media form of communication (Meier 2016: 412) and as a communicative unit (Meier 2016: 421).

A webpage is directly connected to other webpages on the same website and is therefore part of the website. The website itself is connected to all the other websites on the Internet. So, if a website is restructured or redesigned, the content and information on the individual webpage also changes (Djonov & Knox 2014: 171). An individual page within an entire website is therefore also referred to as a webpage in this paper.

According to Djonov & Knox (2014: 172-173), a homepage is a file, also known as an ‘index’, ‘default’ or ‘home’. It can be opened by entering the ‘domain address’ of the website in the ‘Universal Resource Locator (URL) bar’ of the web browser. From a semantic perspective, a homepage serves three important functions. According to Krug (2006, cited in Djonov & Knox 2014: 174), firstly, a homepage should show visitors the main part of the website and the most important information. Secondly, it should present and establish the identity and goal of the website and its operators. Its third function is to show the structure of the website and the navigation options.

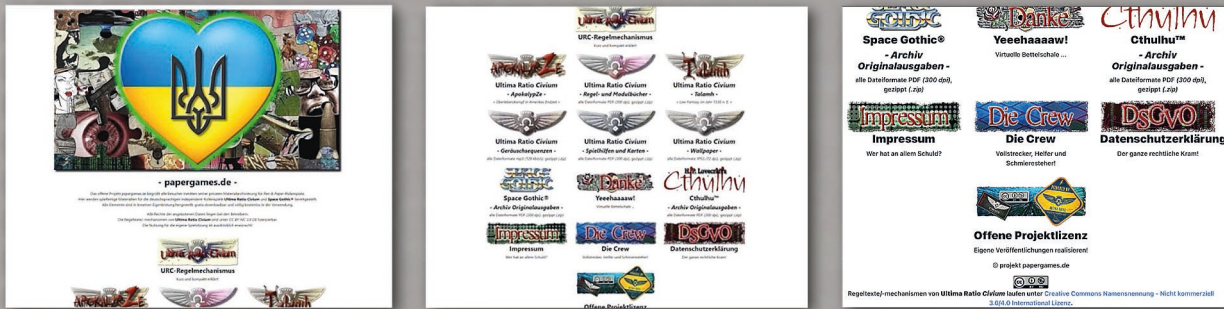
## 2.3) Functions of websites and their homepages

The classification of websites according to Meier (2008: 299-347, cited in Meier 2016: 429) distinguishes between four types of action: news-oriented, image-oriented, campaign-oriented and portal and platform-oriented types of action. The respective classification is based on the communicative action, the design of the interface and sections as well as the use of images (Meier 2016: 429). The image-oriented type of action will be important for this paper. It focuses on the representation of the image, i.e. self-presentation. The aim is to present a positive image to the media and the public. Either individuals or companies and organizations are presented. The homepage serves as a welcome page, the texts present the interests, goals and activities of the website operators. Images usually represent the activity or purpose of the operator or serve as identification images, such as blogs or personal homepages. The next chapters will examine the function of the website to be analyzed.



### 3) The website 'papergames.de'

This project's research focus is the website [papergames.de](http://papergames.de). I will concentrate on the homepage, because otherwise there would be too much material to analyze. My father runs a gaming website called [Papergames.de](http://Papergames.de), where he shares his self-made materials and scripts for pen-and-paper role-playing games. All of the website's content can be downloaded and used for free. The website has existed since 2004, but its purpose has changed over time, as will be explored in the next chapters. Currently, the website is only available in German. The homepage consists of a large collage made up of different types of comics, photos, and other colorful images, arranged like a puzzle. At the literal heart of the collage is a heart-shaped Ukrainian flag bearing a black logo in the middle. Below there is a welcome message for visitors and users, followed by fourteen buttons providing further links to webpages. These links lead to scripts for different storylines, the basic rules, aids and carts for different games, wallpaper, the imprint, the crew and the policy notice (*papergames.de* 2025).



Homepage of [papergames.de](http://papergames.de) (last access on the 18th July 2025)

### 4) Methods

For my qualitative research, I will use two main methods: conducting a biographical interview with the website's publisher and carrying out a content and visual analysis of the homepage. This will focus on the collage and the structure of the content.

#### 4.1) Analyzing a website

To analyze the content and representation of the [papergames.de](http://papergames.de) homepage, I conducted a content analysis (*website analysis after Djonov & Knox 2014; Meier 2016*) and a visual analysis (*Banks 2001*). The model according to Djonov & Knox (2014: 175) is made up of five categories and their subcategories. For this paper, however, not all subcategories were analyzed, but only those that were considered relevant. The 'purpose' should reflect the function, purpose and goal of a website. The ideational meta function examines the structure of the website by dividing the content of the homepage into categories as banner, navigation and content zone. At the textual level, two factors are important for achieving visual cohesion in a composition: salience and framing (*Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, cited in Djonov & Knox, 2014: 187*). Salience focuses on the interaction of elements within the homepage. Framing, on the other hand, examines visual boundaries, colors, and contrasts. Banks (2001) is also important in terms of the digital image and internal narrative. As an image, the website communicates and connects two people, which is ideal for analyzing the purpose of the gaming website. On the other hand, Banks (2001) also suggests that the external narrative could be interesting. As Budka (2021) explains, the image is placed in a context because meaning, interpretation, and the socio-cultural framework are crucial.



## 4.2) Conducting and analyzing an interview

The interview will be a combination of a biographical interview (*Flick 2022*) and a semi-structured interview. It will therefore consist of a mixture of open and spontaneous questions, which will give the interviewee the opportunity to speak freely about his background and personal history with gaming. It is planned to last approximately 1-2 hours. The goal is to explore the relationship between the publisher and his website in the context of gaming and identity. The interview with my father will be conducted in German.

Overall, the aim is to understand the relationship between the website and the information shared in the interview. The transported meaning of the homepage will be supplemented by the outcome of the interview in order to answer how identity and meaning can be created through the digital gaming website *papergames.de*. Also, the development of the website will be explored, investigating its origins and how it has evolved over time (*Internet Archive's Wayback Machine*).

## 4.3) Ethical challenges

Interviewing a close relative is a huge responsibility. Therefore, self-reflection is very important in order to avoid bias, particularly given my position in the field as the interviewee's daughter. Although I will be an observer and listener, I am undoubtedly an insider. Due to my highly subjective view of this research topic, I will need to reflect on every step of the research process (*Pilbeam 2023*). Therefore, it is necessary to write a research journal and take field notes in order to understand my own position within this research. However, being emotionally engaged does not have to be disadvantageous. An emotional dimension within the research can have advantages for "developing relationships, understandings, and knowledge" in order to complete research (*Pilbeam 2023: 821*).



## 5) Results of the interview and the website analysis

### The interview:

The two-hour interview was conducted and recorded online via FaceTime. The interview was successful overall due to the serious atmosphere. My easy access to the field and my insider position within the research project undoubtedly helped to make it possible, but the interview situation was still professional. A total of 75 questions were discussed. During the interview six general topics were covered: general information about the interviewee, definition of gaming and games, personal history of the interviewee, information about the website, gaming as safe space and lastly gaming identities.

In the beginning the publisher defined gaming for him personally as “a pastime/diversion and a kind of hobby.” His favorite game is a role-playing game with a plot that the players must unravel, involving numerous arcs of suspense. Also, he mentions: „For me, gaming is definitely fun, new experiences, relaxation. It’s best to play with people you know because the more you trust the people you’re playing with, the more relaxed you’ll be.” So, it is about social interaction with friends and people with similar gaming preferences. When describing the people he plays with, he prefers to call them his ‘friends group’ (*people he has known and played with for a long time, and meeting up with whom feels like coming home*). He finds the term ‘gaming community’ too digital and modern.

However, there is a difference between playing computer games online after work to relax and playing paper role-playing games with friends in the same room as a fun hobby. Also, he sees gaming as a human instinct: “We all have one thing in common and I would like to quote Schiller, the good Friedrich, who once said: Man needs bread and games. Bread to grow. Play to experience this existence.” An interesting distinction is made between analogue and digital gaming for the purposes of this research: „Analog and digital are different worlds of play. Yes, they are simply different planets, almost for me.” The publisher uses his website to share role-playing game materials, particularly in paper form. Although these materials are shared in a digital forum, they are designed for analogue play and could be used for online gaming. Therefore, the distinction between online and analogue is blurred. Analogue games are played together at a table, so they require communication. With online games, communication is somewhat reduced. He further explains: „Apart from that, the website has little to do with online games in the modern sense, but is more of a private archive for downloading role-playing material.” The publisher sees himself as an “old-fashioned” content creator, producing gaming content for visitors to his website. He runs his website according to the following principle: Creation before consumption. For him, it is more important to create new content than to play games himself, which demonstrates the importance of self-confirmation, for example through download statistics. Another important outcome is the use of the website as a form of self-expression and self-portrayal. The highest motivation is the satisfaction of creating a storyline or book and seeing it published on the website. In the publisher’s words: “That means I put a new book into the digital flow and it has its own life, which I think is great.”

One interesting topic is whether, and to what extent, gaming is political. The Ukrainian flag serves as a ‘Do not enter’-sign, as it is intended that only like-minded individuals download the materials. The publisher explains the intention behind the puzzle with the Ukrainian flag, saying that a puzzle consists of interlocking pieces. It is important in a game that the rules fade into the background so that the player can focus on the content, and for this reason, the rules should not be too overbearing. Furthermore, he is generally repelled by war, repression and fascism, and, following the start of Russia’s war of aggression, he felt compelled to display his support for the invaded country by incorporating the Ukrainian flag into the puzzle. He states that this has nothing to do with the published role-playing games or the purpose of the website. This demonstrates that presenting yourself and your work on a digital platform inevitably carries a political message to some extent.



„I don't think gaming is very different from life itself.“ This relates to the part of the discussion where we considered whether there is one gaming identity, or multiple ones, and what relationship, if any, they have with one's everyday identity. Once again, the lines between real personality traits and the roles you play are blurred, and no clear answers were given. The interviewee explains it this way: “A gamer always takes his personality with him/her and regardless of whether we are sitting at a table with an analog idiot, or you are connected to an analog idiot via a network on the screen: an idiot remains an idiot, so it's difficult to say.” However, role-play is a form of theatre, and using an avatar while gaming is considered to be playing a certain role. He also explains how avatars are used. Typically, a gamer always uses the same avatar, or digital identity, but this must be distinguished from the different roles you play, such as soldier, farmer or dragon lord. The avatar with which you enter the game is something else entirely. “That's basically my gaming identity. But this identity for online gaming is actually hollow; it's just a name. It's actually me with a different name.”

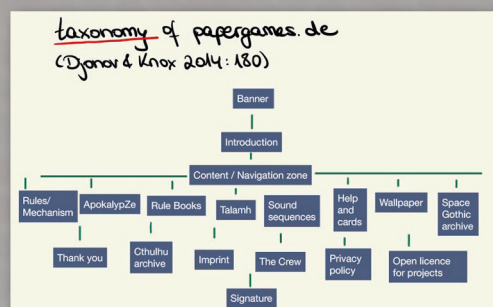
Clearly, there are also dangers associated with gaming, especially for young people, such as becoming lost in the game. The interviewee sees more dangers in digital gaming: if a character is unstable, too young or insecure, they could be negatively influenced by for example a violent game. Overall, the purpose of the website is to showcase the publisher's materials and creative work intended for analogue role-playing games. Online gaming is more about relaxing with friends after a stressful day and is less meaningful to the publisher himself. The question of having different identities is not easy to answer, but your real personality traits always play a big part, even when playing a fictional role.

## The homepage papergames.de:

The homepage of papergames.de is structured into the following parts: the banner (*the collage*) is the head of the homepage, followed closely by the navigation and content zone, which blend into each other. Fourteen links to further webpages on the website are presented as the main content here. Therefore, the website's main content is also used for navigating through the website. At the bottom is typically the signature and the copyright note of the website.



The taxonomy after Djonov & Knox (2014: 180) illustrates the structure of the homepage. The content is divided into 14 sections, ranging from rulebooks and storylines to cards, the imprint and the introduction of the crew, as well as the privacy policy. Therefore, the homepage provides a detailed overview of the website's content.





The ‘salience’ of the homepage is very high due to these results: The large central collage of gaming and comic visuals is placed in the upper center and immediately draws the eye when the homepage is visited. The size and placement of the heart-shaped flag, as well as the bright colors, are particularly effective in grabbing attention. At the same time, the Ukrainian flag counts as a cultural symbol. The black logo in the middle of the heart is the Ukrainian coat of arms and is therefore a highly political symbol. There are bright and clear color contrasts on the homepage, for example on the banner between the puzzle and the bright yellow-blue heart. The rest of the homepage has a white background, which provides a striking contrast to the black text. The fourteen logos in the content zone also stand out against the clear, white background thanks to their clear color boundaries. The foreground elements, such as the logos on the links, are sharp and high-resolution, which creates depth against the less detailed backgrounds. There is no element overlap except for the puzzle on the banner, where some visual elements overlap with others. This draws attention and enhances focus. Other cultural symbols besides the flag are also used, such as fantasy and gaming motifs like warriors, medieval fonts, and weapons, which resonate with global gaming themes. The ‘framing’ on the banner area is weak, because the colors of the puzzle are similar and in harmony. There are not many clear boundaries, except for the heart-shaped flag, which makes the elements seem connected. In the content area it is the other way around: The white background and contrasting colors and shapes create a sense of disconnection within the composition which supports a stronger framing. But because of the symmetrical arrangement of the content logos there is still harmony within the homepage’s composition. This is why the homepage looks all in all appealing, structured and clearly arranged to visitors.

The visual collage in the form of a puzzle can be seen as representing the values and identities of both the community and the publisher. This may have a political dimension (*internal narrative*, Banks, 2001). Conversely, the visual elements can be understood as a stereotypical or idealized construction of ‘gamer identity’ created by external observers or visitors (*external narrative*, Banks 2001). We can connect this outcome to the interview. The interlocking pieces of the puzzle represent a game in which the rules are not important, enabling the player to focus on the content. Therefore, the content is highlighted. So, the visual elements of the collage, such as selfies and typical gaming motifs, can be seen as ethnographic texts that tell stories about the publisher himself and his desire to showcase his creative work and share it with others. These outcomes align with the three key functions of homepages (Krug 2006, cited in Djonov & Knox 2014). Papergames.de demonstrates that a homepage should display the main content of the website and the most important information to visitors. It also presents and establishes the identity and purpose of the website and its operators and shows the structure of the website and how to navigate to further webpages and more content.

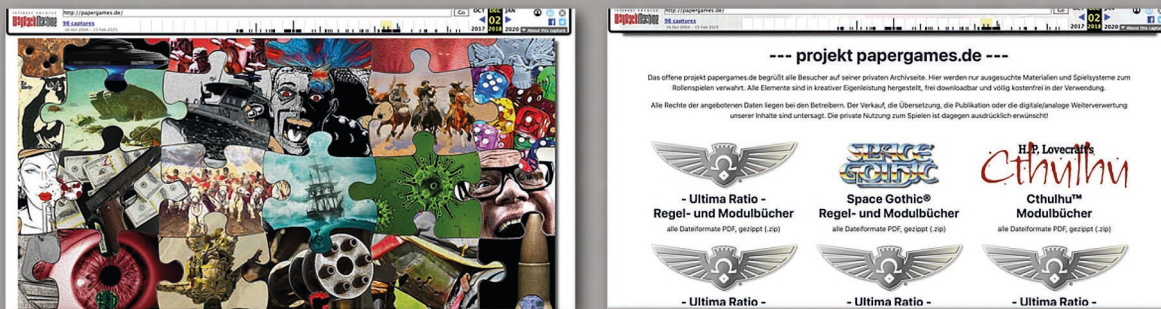
We have seen in the interview that the website is image-oriented, it focuses on representing the publisher of papergames.de and his creative work (Meier 2008, 2016). The aim is to present a positive image to the media and the public in order to build a fan base. The content is shared freely with anyone who is interested. This is openly displayed in the welcome message, so the homepage can be compared to a digital business card. As there is no online community forum, the publisher does not want trolls or hate comments to be shared on the website. The purpose is not to interact directly with the community, but rather to share content. In this sense, the website can be understood as a communication tool that enables the publisher to reach people with similar gaming preferences and a similar mindset (Meier 2016).

The Wayback Machine shows how the website has developed over time. From 2004 to 2018, the homepage features an older, cleaner design without any photos. From the interview, we know that this design was used when the website was selling actual games (*when the publisher was self-employed*). The new design has been in place since 2018 to showcase the creator’s gaming materials as a hobby, and it was only updated in 2024 when the Ukrainian flag and its political message were added.





Homepage of papergames.de October 2004 (Wayback Machine 18th July 2025)



Homepage of papergames.de 2018-2024 (Wayback Machine 18th July 2025)

## 6) Conclusion

In summary, the purpose of the website and of creating content for papergames.de is to establish a particular online presence for the website and its publisher. The website aims to represent the publisher and his creative work, acting as a digital business card.

The publisher aims to create meaning through the self-representation of his creative work and political values, conveying a specific message to visitors. This means that the website and materials are not intended for everyone, but rather for individuals who share similar (*political*) values and perspectives. As no money is involved, the focus is on the publisher creating personal meaning within a community of friends, followers and perhaps fans.

The gaming identity of the publisher is constructed in different ways because the papergames.de content creator is also a gamer himself. It is important to draw a distinction between creating new content for the purpose of showcasing and seeking social interaction or diversion while gaming. Therefore, the publisher can be seen as a mixture of a play-oriented engaged gamer who prioritizes enjoying social interaction with his friends in a digital safe space. While there is no direct interaction with other users on his website, he is as well a game-oriented engaged gamer, driven by his personal goal achievement (Dietkow 2023). Also, players' personality traits can directly impact their in-game actions and preferences. The publisher identifies as an achiever (*setting and achieving goals*), a socializer (*gaming with friends for social interaction*), a killer (*immersing himself in violent games as a diversion from daily life*) and an explorer (*being curious and creative with new roles and stories*). In conclusion, the research subject's gaming motivation can be divided into achieving the publisher's goals, socializing with gaming friends, and total immersion in a new, creative digital reality (Yee 2014). Overall, there is no universal gaming identity because defining one's (*digital*) identity is highly individual.

My insider position and emotional engagement with the field were certainly helpful in gaining access to and trust within the research process. Nevertheless, many questions and topics in the field of gaming and identity remain unanswered. With more time and more efficient resources, this research could be expanded and become more valuable in the future. Further investigation would deepen our understanding of this important and highly topical subject, as well as its entanglements with dangers and prejudices. This would make the digital world of gaming more accessible and understandable to everyone in society.



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**Aid:** DeepL.com to correct the grammar and spelling of the written English (for pages 3–15).