The Construction of Value and Identity in Mobile Games

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THE CONSTRUCTION OF VALUE AND IDENTITY IN MOBILE GAMES

by

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Abstract

Previous research in game studies has indicated a strong link between identity and video games, with the “gamer” identity serving as an especially contentious and hotly debated example. This identity has been rejected by avid players and questioned in terms of its gendered and racialized associations. Mobile games open up video games to new articulations of the player identity by diversifying the kinds of audiences that have access to their modes of play. However, mobile games are often dismissed by players and academics alike as frivolous and unimportant, despite mobile gaming comprising a significant portion of the video game industry. In this dissertation, I argue that value in mobile games is constructed in a way that complicates the construction of a gaming identity. Combining an analysis of the mobile game Pokémon GO and an audience study of self-identified mobile game players, I further argue that mobile games pre-constitute specific audiences that are always already fans of the game, while audiences tend to incorporate mobile games into their extant identities. Rhetorically, mobile games blur the edges of the magic circle through their procedures. Through this rhetoric, they center a rhetoric of strength. In doing so, mobile games adopt an aesthetic of casual play but a rhetoric of hardcore play. Mobile games also construct a certain audience through their procedures, one that has economic capital and geographic mobility, one that is ideologically cosmopolitan, and one that is always already a fan of the game. A game’s rhetoric does not fully determine the audience approach to using and enjoying the game. The audiences I interviewed enjoy playing their mobile games but also experience
a certain degree of shame when investing in them. Mobile game players are willing to play in ways that resemble hardcore play but are reluctant to adopt a fan identity in relation to their games. Because mobile games are broadly understood to be casual in nature, they are not taken as seriously and not constructed to have as much value as hardcore games among the gaming community, and, in fact, their value must not be seen to exceed similar console games. Therefore, value and identity in mobile games are connected by how the game is legitimated in the game’s procedures and in the eyes of the player.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

It’s a fact—I am a better person for having my Pikachu with me. I first downloaded Niantic’s *Pokémon GO* in 2016 on its initial launch date and it changed my life. As a child I had loved my *Pokémon* “Pikachu,” a glorified pedometer that you could strap onto a belt or a purse. This peripheral item allowed your steps to count towards gifts that could be given to your Pikachu to gain its affection. Then, in 2016, *Pokémon GO* was released to the app store, allowing it to move from pedometer to mobile phone. With *Pokémon GO*, I found myself exercising more, walking a little farther, and socializing more often to reap as many in-game rewards as I could. It was easy, too, because *Pokémon GO* is a mobile game, so it was already with me all the time; I didn’t have to go out of my way to bring any extra devices. And the best part was that Pikachu was there by my side, cheering for me the whole time.

As smartphones have grown into a staple of modern society, so, too, have mobile games grown in ubiquity. Mobile games are video games available for mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets. Examples include Rovio’s *Angry Birds*, King’s *Candy Crush*, and Niantic’s aforementioned *Pokémon GO*. It was the introduction of Apple’s app store and similar digital marketplaces on Android and Google phones that launched the proliferation of games on mobile devices (Anderson, 2019). They are now some of the most downloaded applications in the app stores of every phone provider, ranking only behind social media and shopping apps; this translates to about half of the US population downloading and playing mobile games (Carpenter, 2019; Wadsworth, 2016). Further, the hours played by mobile gamers is on the rise, with cumulative play time increasing
amongst players and more time spent playing mobile games than console and PC games combined in a given week (Anderton, 2019). The introduction of mobile games effectively initiated a growing behemoth of leisure activity.

Mobile games, thus, can be said to have value, and they express their value in multiple ways. One way is fiscally, as these games, despite being free, can be extremely lucrative for game developers. Mobile gaming accounts for about 45% of all video gaming revenue (Kaplan, 2019). While mobile games have not yet overtaken console and PC gaming in this arena, they have brought in so much new revenue that the games market continues to grow exponentially each year with mobile gaming taking the lion’s share. There are a few ways mobile games can bring in profit: they can rely on the familiar paid model, in which the user pays a price upfront for the game, they can transfer the cost to advertisers through in-app advertising, or they can use in-app purchases (IAPs) to collect money from users as they play (Asper, 2017). With so many ways to bring in revenue and generally affordable upfront pricing, mobile games are an attractive product for developers and consumers alike.

The second way mobile games express their value is through players’ ability to extract affective value from games. For instance, players enjoy positive feelings associated with mobile game use, as some of the reasons players give for playing mobile games include feeling relaxed, engaged, interested, and happy (Widener, 2017). Mobile games are more likely to invoke these relaxed feelings in players than social media apps (Widener, 2017). Players also enjoy the increased mobility and temporal flexibility that are offered by design in mobile games compared to other platforms (Chan, 2008;
Mobile games are not just inexpensive, they are an accessible form of pleasure that can transform any time into leisure time.

It is important that research in games investigate not only facets such as function of design and play, but who is playing and what mobile games do. However, whereas conversations about identity have taken root in more traditional gaming conversations, they continue to elide research on mobile games. In this introduction, I first discuss the link between identity, value, and mobile games. I then briefly cover my methodological approaches and my theoretical framework. Finally, I provide a preview of the chapters to come.

Questions of Identity and Mobile Games.

Traditionally, the cultural and academic conversation about gaming has focused on men and boys at the exclusion of other players. In the mid-1990s, men were the majority of video game consumers and so games were thought by players and developers to be steadfastly in the realm of the boys (Kocurek, 2015). This is no accident, and a few factors contributed to the masculinization of video games, for instance,

the greater relative freedom of boys to move through and participate in public culture; the alignment of computer and video games technologies with both military interests and competitive male-dominated sports; the subsequent affiliation of video gaming with violent thematic content; and the ongoing association of technological skill with masculinity. (Kocurek, 2015, p. 3)

In other words, adolescent boys have traditionally had more freedom to embrace popular culture interests, and popular media like video games have in turn been designed around
an assumed male audience with stereotypically masculine material. As gaming gained prominence in the United States, gaming became a cultural identity associated with the aforementioned masculine qualities. As Chess and Paul (2019) argue, this pattern of association demonstrates that gaming has always had an inextricable link with identity on a level that other media do not.

Not only have players, gaming communities, and game developers associated gaming with the masculine, but, as a result, gaming spaces have been hostile spaces for people who do not fit into those male identities, namely women, queer, and transgender individuals. GamerGate is a storied example in which game developer Zoe Quinn was harassed by Anonymous, 4chan users, and related groups for entering a sexual relationship with a game reviewer for the pop culture website Kotaku (notably, one who was not reviewing her game) (Chess and Shaw, 2015). While on the surface, GamerGate purported to be about ethics in gaming journalism, at its core, GamerGate exposed the sexist underbelly of the gaming industry and the gaming community (Chess and Shaw, 2015). This is one example of a pattern of behavior that shows even without the addition of a scandal, marginalized individuals are constantly being pushed out of play spaces by toxic rhetoric and hostile communities under the guise of protecting the “true” gamer identity. In the aftermath, women, queer folks, and people of color became the subject of harassment (Ruberg, 2019). Those who spoke out against #GamerGate were dismissed with the new, derogatory term “Social Justice Warrior” and their criticisms were not taken seriously (Chess and Shaw, 2015). Likewise, games scholars who study diversity have been the subject of criticism by players in the name of a more “objective” game studies (Ruberg, 2019).
Broadly, the term “gamer” refers to someone who plays video games (Shaw, 2011). As a result, academics label any person who plays video games a “gamer,” but this is a point of contention (Shaw, 2011). When industry professionals refer to gamers, they are typically specifically referring to a certain kind of gamer: the hardcore gamer (Shaw, 2011). The hardcore gamer is generally characterized as someone who invests a lot of time and money into their gaming, stereotypically playing more violent video games (Juul, 2010). As a result, players that do not fit this specific style of gameplay are left out of conversations about identities. Further, this hardcore type of play is still associated with adolescent boys in particular, so marginalized individuals might not feel like they can claim the gamer identity, or even that that want to claim that identity (Shaw, 2011).

The focus on self-described or stereotypical gamers means that mobile games and their players are too often overlooked. By investigating their unique modes of play we can better understand more gamers and video games as a whole. Because of their relative accessibility, mobile games have opened the doors for a variety of new players. Mobile games come in a wide range of genres that expand beyond the action/adventure and shooter games that tend to be associated with gaming to introduce titles including puzzle games, word games, and matching games, many of which are designed to appeal to women players and older players (Carpenter, 2019) When we concern ourselves exclusively with “gamers” and the kinds of games they play, we end up overlooking the varied and diverse players that exist, and the multitude of playstyles they bring to gaming.

Women, especially, are outnumbering men as players in many mobile game categories. Despite the narrow cultural definition of gamers as young white men, women
already account for about half of all console and PC gamers, so it follows that women also play mobile games in considerable numbers (Chess and Shaw, 2015). In many parts of the world, such as parts of Asia, women players outnumber men as mobile game players, and in the US, sixty-five percent of women play mobile games (Joshi, 2019; “Change the Game,” 2019). Indeed, in many genres of mobile games—such as match-three games like Candy Crush—women far outnumber men as players (Joshi, 2019). Women and older players often discover games through recommendations from friends and enjoy their favorites as stress relievers in small pockets of time between work and other engagements (Joshi, 2019). As gamers, they are being called “hypercasual” players, a player identity that is defined by its separateness from the “true” gamer identity (Joshi, 2019). Despite the fact that women are not only playing console and PC games as much as men and even outnumber male players in the mobile games realm, women players often continue to be excluded from conversations about gaming.

Women are not, which some GamerGate participants argue, just playing for the attention of men, but instead playing for their own enjoyment and leisure. As more women are playing mobile games, more women are also spending money on mobile games. In fact, women are 79% more likely to spend money on mobile games than men (Takahashi, 2018). When game developers began noticing the large gender disparity between gamers in the 1990s, they started making efforts to market games toward women so that they might be more profitable (Kocurek, 2015). Feminist activists and industry leaders alike both expressed investment in the girls’ games movement in which they created video games marketed toward girls and that might line the shelves of toy stores (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998). Now, with the rise of mobile games, that disparity is being
more than made up for, and women players are an even more attractive market, thus becoming valuable as an audience segment. However, despite their position in the market, women players are only 27% as likely as their male counterparts to talk about mobile games to friends (“Change the Game,” 2019). Women play games as much as their counterparts, but there are still stereotypes around how women engage with video games and what kinds of video games they should enjoy.

Value and identity should fit together neatly based on video gaming’s historical struggles with legitimation and contention over the gamer identity. Value is articulated as what players feel a video game is worth. Identity, on the other hand, takes on the contours of how players construct their sense of self in relationship to or even around video games. And yet scholarship on gaming has yet to fully explore how these ideas come together in mobile games.

In this dissertation, I investigate the ways identity contributes to the construction of value in mobile games. Methodologically, I approach this problem from the angles of both rhetoric and reception studies. Thus, this study places a rhetorical analysis of one popular mobile game into conversations with interviews with mobile game players to understand what value means to players, how they perceive that value in mobile games, and how value appears in mobile games themselves.

Guiding my research is a feminist game studies perspective. According to Gray, Vorhees, and Vossen (2018), a feminist game studies perspective, “examines how gender, and its intersections with race, class, sexuality, and so on, is produced, represented, and consumed, and practiced in and through digital games” (p. 1). This perspective further understands games as “instruments of hegemony” (Gray, Vorhees, &
Vossen, 2018, p. 3), which means players are contending with games as vessels of ideology that they must decode through their play. As my question is invested in the value of games as it is constructed by players, alongside issues player-defined game-related identities, this perspective allows me to identify the rhetorical presentation of ideologies, then interrogate how audiences respond to them, whether they accept them, reject them, or negotiate them to their own ends.

To that end, my research question asks, how are identity and value constructed in mobile games? In cultural studies, identity is related to how an individual defines themselves, rather than identities assigned from outside the self (Hall, 1996a). I conceptualize value as something that is not inherent in the games themselves or assigned to the games by developers, but as something that is constructed by the players. This means that in addition to financial value of these games, value can also be understood as something that is extracted from the games by players.

While the concept of identity as I have defined it here is central to game studies (Chess, 2009; Chess, 2017; Shaw, 2011; Shaw, 2014; Mäyrä, 2012; Heneman, 2014), there is a dearth of knowledge on the relationship between identity and mobile games. In general, mobile games as a whole are under researched (Chess and Paul, 2019). Further, not much is known about how players characterize value compared to the substantial research on players’ economic transactions, as most research tends to characterize “casual” gaming solely as corporations’ disingenuous attempts to turn a profit rather than as worthwhile play (Chess, 2009). My research aims to bridge these gaps by putting these factors into conversation with one another, both from the perspective of the games themselves as a form of rhetoric and from the perspective of reception studies. The
former highlights what games do and how their functions are used to persuade and the latter has historically shown the importance of talking to audiences about the media they enjoy, yielding interesting results that would not be otherwise accessible (Radway, 1982).

**Chapter previews**

In Chapter 1, I introduced mobile games, their rising popularity, and the economic and affective benefits that developers and players alike receive from them. I introduced my research question and positioned my research in feminist game studies, mobile games research, reception studies, and rhetorical criticism. In doing so, I outlined the gap that this study fills by demonstrating the relationship between mobile games, value, and identity.

Next, in Chapter 2, I review previous literature on my subject. I cover the literature on game studies with special attention to mobile gaming, review research on games and identity, and discuss works on media, audiences, and value. Together, this literature demonstrates that casual games (such as mobile games) have been increasingly feminized, and this feminization results in perceived devaluing by game audiences. At the same time, it shows that, as Chess and Paul (2019) have argued, there is a lack of research into casual gaming and mobile gaming that form the basis of my dissertation.

Then, in Chapter 3, I outline this study’s guiding methodology as well as the specific methods I employ for answering my research question. In this section I break up my methods into a rhetorical analysis and a reception study, and I provide details for how I carried out those components of the study. Rhetorical criticism allows me to center the text and understand the arguments in the game’s procedures. A reception study allows me to examine how players receive those messages and what they do with them.
In Chapter 4, I argue that mobile games blur the boundaries between the game world and the real world. In doing so, they construct an aesthetic of casual play while arguing procedures of core play. Further, they construct a specific identity for players, one that has economic capital, is geographically mobile and culturally cosmopolitan, and is already a fan of *Pokémon GO*.

In Chapter 5, I argue that players are reluctant to construct a fan identity around their mobile games. This is because mobile games are not perceived as valuable and players are self-conscious about others’ conceptions of their player identity. However, mobile game players still enjoy their games, and they incorporate those games into their extant identities.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I conclude by arguing that identity is, indeed, central to how players play mobile games. Mobile games construct identities for players, whereas players incorporate mobile games into their identities. Mobile games deploy a rhetoric of core play to legitimate their value, and players use the same mechanisms to construct their own value. However, there are still external tensions that prevent players from adopting a fan identity, and mobile games are not legitimated through their own procedural rhetorics.
Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Understanding the relationship between value, games, and identity demands an exploration of the previous literature behind these topics of study. In the following chapter, I will review literature on the broad areas of cultural studies, feminist media studies, and game studies as a whole. Additionally, I delve into the narrower topics of mobile games, games and identity, and audience and value to provide a groundwork to support my research question: how are identity and value constructed in mobile games?

Cultural Studies and Ideology

In order to best situate the feminist media studies approach later, I will start by building a base of ideology, culture, and polysemy from a cultural studies perspective.

The study of ideology involves the conditions under which an idea is formed and in cultural studies is typically studied through the lens of media. Althusser’s (1971) exploration of Marx’s metaphor demonstrates a clear economic infrastructure (base) and a hazy guide to superstructure. The base, in this case is economic, whereas the superstructure is ideological. One question that constantly plagues the mind of theorists of ideology is why people do not seem to realize that they are being subjugated to these dominant hegemonies (Hall, 1996). Ideology, Althusser (1971) notes, is so tied to the material world that when we reproduce labor, for instance, we also reproduce the ideologies that created that labor in the first place. If you build a factory to be successful like somebody else with a factory, for example, you still have to convince people to work for you, and chances are, you have to copy the former factory owners arguments in that
realm, too. Therefore, a basic understanding of ideology requires us to consider our relation to the material world.

This zealous interest in ideology in cultural studies can be further attributed to the growth of the culture industries and a concern with how those industries shaped our ability to reject or consent to dominant ideologies (Hall, 1996). Alongside the growth of culture industries like radio and television, the scholarly interest in them accelerated. However, that interest was not always positive. Mass culture in particular was often understood by scholars as a “hypodermic needle,” for ideological transference, one that individuals were not seen as able to resist in any meaningful way (Radway, 1984). Cultural studies intervened into this idea, resisting the idea that ideology is something that merely happens to individuals because of mass culture. Rather, the moments that make up ideologies comprise a “complex structure of dominance” (p. 117), sustained through the articulation of connected practices (Hall, 1973). The more we progress through the ideological conversation in cultural studies, the more we discover that ideology is not just a one-way street. Rather, everyone is involved in the re/creating of ideologies, even if some have more dominance than others. The most dominant or hegemonic ideologies are the ones we come to consider “common sense” (Radway, 1984).

More often, ideologies are in tension with one another within cultural objects, which Fiske calls “sites of struggle” (1989). This best characterizes the role of ideology in my approach to cultural studies. According to Fiske (1989), “popular culture is the culture of the subordinated and disempowered and thus always bears within it the signs of power relations” (p. 5). It is in culture that we are able to trace these ideologies and the
power they hold because it is through the re/production of culture that ideology is re/produced. This understanding of ideology gives way to the meaning of “culture” from a cultural studies perspective. In some ways, the culture in cultural studies can be seen as a response to the staunch opposition to mass culture among scholars of the Frankfurt School, the theoretical predecessor to the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Radway, 1984). At the time of the Frankfurt School, the ability to appreciate art was perceived to be limited to a certain elite and educated social class, and members of the Frankfurt School were part of that educated social class (Radway, 1984). Further, mass culture was seen as an extension of capitalist conservativism as an effect of the successful propaganda campaigns of mid-century fascist governments, and this was antithetical to their Marxist roots (Radway, 1984). Because of this, mass culture was met with a good degree of skepticism by academics who studied culture.

Often considered in opposition to mass culture was the idea of high culture. Raymond Williams (1958) describes this understanding of culture as posh tea shops, cathedrals, fine arts, and “acting as if [they] were one of the older and more respectable departments” (p. 93) of the university. High culture is meant to be appreciated by members of a certain social echelon, and thus an “outward emphatically visible culture, [a] sign of a special, cultivated people” (p. 93) comes to signify high culture, in contrast to low culture, which is the culture of the masses or the ordinary culture (Williams, 1958). Cultural studies became interested in the low culture, thinking critically about the kind of everyday culture that people enjoy.

This kind of culture is extremely preoccupied with being socially profitable. For instance, Bourdieu (1979) explains further that the petite bourgeoisie who enjoy this kind
of culture were so consumed with appearing culturally relevant that actual taste makers thought they looked more like a “grotesque homage” (84). However, culture is not only about appearances. There are real, material consequences to the ability to navigate culture as well. Bourdieu (1979) points out that it is cultural capital, for instance, that allows students to successfully navigate education. Culture is not just leisure, pleasure, and aesthetics; culture is a necessary form of capital to successfully navigate the world we live in. The implication is that if we fail to acquire cultural capital early on, we are already at a disadvantage as we continue to learn and grow, and as we continue to try to obtain social and economic capital. Doing so might not be possible without the necessary cultural capital for exchange.

One way to imagine culture is how Hall (1973) maps it as an, “articulation of linked but distinctive moments—production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction” (117). When imagined as moments of production, circulation, and consumption, we get an idea of where culture comes from, and what we do with it. An important common thread in cultural studies is that cultural texts—television, for instance—are not created in a vacuum. They are created by people who are all equally immersed in ideology (Williams, 1975). Further, what people do with culture is a key area of study, as cultural objects are used by consumers, often in surprising and unintended ways. As with ideology, we are not merely helplessly subjected to a cultural hegemony that we are powerless to resist. De Certeau (1984), for instance, describes the practice of “la perruque” in which workers use work resources and time to create work that is free, creative, and not for profit. Like writing a love letter on company time, often when we ask the question, “what do people actually do with culture” the answer is “live
their lives” (de Certeau, 1984). People use culture to resist the structures that scaffold their lives, finding agency in resistance and specifically in the varied meanings they can find in culture.

Originally explored by Barthes and later introduced to television studies (and, thus, cultural studies) by Fiske, polysemy is the idea that a cultural object can have many meanings to many people. To elaborate, “no text could effectively police just one meaning (monosemy), but rather [texts are] open to interpretation in a variety of ways (hence, polysemy)” (qtd in Gray & Lotz, 2012, p. 44). Fiske would take this a step further and argue that popular culture, “can only be popular in the first place because an audience has found personal meaning for a text, and thus has domesticated the text in some way” (Gray & Lotz, 2012, p. 44). Fiske’s argument here is one of the main reasons polysemy is more than just a subset of the “culture” theme in cultural studies.

Polysemy is about how profoundly audiences impact texts through their interactions with them. Even if polysemy is just facet of culture, it is one worth highlighting as it is the theoretical ground that makes the varied analyses in cultural studies possible.

Polysemy also appears in what Hall (1973) describes as a ‘lack of equivalence’ in the process of encoding/decoding. When audiences interpret a transmitted message differently from the producer’s intention, Hall (1973) attributes this not to misunderstanding, but to, “a lack of fit between codes [that] has a great deal to do with the structural differences of relation and position between broadcasters and audiences... [It] also has something to do with the asymmetry between the codes of ‘source’ and ‘receiver’” (p. 120). Thus, when an audience does not seem to understand a message, or when they reject it outright, it can be said that they are not operating within the dominant
or preferred code, but a negotiated code, or, in the latter case, an oppositional code (Hall, 1975). These codes are informed by ideology and describe the way audiences negotiate the ideologies embedded in media messages. Similarly, by looking back to Hall and the technical process of encoding/decoding as one of polysemy, we remember that these messages are not merely materializing out of thin air; they are being created and encoded by individuals into media messages.

In this section, I looked at ideology, and the ways ideologies are re/created through the culture industry. I further defined culture and the ways culture is understood by cultural studies as the ordinary: something everyday people do. Finally, I looked at how culture is communicated through polysemy, and the ways audiences can accept, negotiate or reject the intended messages of producers. In the next section, I will go more in depth into how cultural studies is adopted into the feminist media studies approach that grounds this dissertation.

**Feminist Media Studies**

The basics of ideology, culture, and polysemy through a cultural studies perspective are further articulated through the feminist media studies approach. In this section, I will first explain what I mean by feminist media studies, including the boundaries of the approach. I will next give some examples of feminist media studies research. Then, I will talk about other places feminist media studies has drawn from, such as film studies and content analysis. Finally, I will trace some important turns in the area of study before, ultimately, tying the approach into a game studies perspective.

Within the origins of feminist media studies there are two main features: a focus on gender and a focus away from more necessarily mainstream forms of media like news
journalism. A focus on gender is not necessarily a focus on women. Shaw (2015), for instance, notes that the “add women and stir” variety of adding women to video games does not work well in terms of representation in games, nor does it work in terms of creating feminist media studies from the media studies before it. Instead, Shaw (2015) suggests that a focus on the ways in which gender impacts how media is used, interpreted, and represented offers a more fruitful approach. This can mean looking at how stereotypes of women are legitimated in the Miss America Pageant, as in early iterations of feminist media studies, or it can mean looking at how girlhood is seen as an exceptional stage of identity formation for women, amongst other examples in the history of the field (Douglas, 2017; Frith and McRobbie, 1978).

Feminist media studies is increasingly intersectional in nature, one of its features that stems from making the personal political. As feminist media studies brushes with other approaches, the interconnectedness of intersections of identity become apparent. For instance, a transnational lens allows us to see how Princess Diana is remembered as a global mother specifically because of her brand of white femininity, something that would be difficult to see if not for the ability to look at the interlocking nature of different intersections of identity (Shome, 2014). She argues that it was Diana’s specific white femininity that allowed her to move as a figure so easily between the national to the global and back again (Shome, 2014). Similarly, in fandom studies, Black women must carve out their own fan spaces because fandom studies is not seen as a place in which identity is a central concern (Warner, 2015). Warner (2015) argues that Black women have been excluded from fandom because fandom is not seen as a space that is informed by identity (Warner, 2015). This is also why it can be said feminist media studies is
increasingly intersectional. Not every work can focus on every issue, but the field is moving in a direction that attempts to recognize and point out the interconnectedness of various identities and to raise silenced voices.

Because in its inception feminist media studies had nothing to draw on except the heavily quantitative or highly philosophical extant methods of media analysis like content analysis or philosophy, early feminist media scholars used these and the frameworks that were available to do the early work in feminist media studies that we know today (Douglas, 2017). For instance, Mulvey (1975) used a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens to talk about visual pleasure in film and van Zoonen (1994) suggests borrowing from approaches such as production studies, reception studies, and semiotics to address what she viewed as the biggest problems facing feminist media studies at the time. A feminist media studies approach consequently has the potential to be highly interdisciplinary.

Likewise, new developments in media have also shaped theoretical and methodical approaches in feminist media studies. Music, for instance, has been a generative place of scholarship for feminist media studies. Young girls are not raised to grow up to want to be rock stars, and often times instead they receive classical music training that is not conducive to rock music, and thus they must learn later in life (Bayton, 1990). In their introduction to hip-hop feminism, Durham, Cooper, and Morris (2014) discuss how feminism does not elevate hip-hop, but how the tensions between hip-hop and feminism create a percussive and generative space for creation rather than critique. They further explain that hip-hop feminism opens new doors and offers new ways to challenge gender norms that are not available otherwise (Durham et al., 2013). Thus, as
media evolves we must look for new ways to fully consider the meanings of these messages.

Increasingly more identities are represented on screens, and audiences may interact with these representations in different ways. If we turn to screen examples, Smith-Shomade (2002) talks about how black women are objectified and stereotyped on television, but how those representations are interpreted through the subjectivities and identities of the viewing audience. Beltrán (2009) notes the dearth of Latinx representation and how who is cast is shaped by American politics at the time. Thus, we can see that some problems continue to emerge. The interaction between representation and reception, for example, remains a problem that feminist media studies has always engaged with, and will likely continue to engage with both in terms of number and quality.

Extending the issues of representation and reception, video game studies are often analyzed as places where representation matters to reception in intensely personal ways (Shaw, 2015). Because of this, Shaw (2015) suggests we should think, in general, about why representation matters to use in the first place, perhaps especially as academia and the public outside of it are not so separate. Chess and Shaw (2014) received death threats after writing about representations and toxic masculinity in video games in the midst of Gamer Gate. They noted that the concept of dismantling hegemonic masculinity sounds scary to someone outside of academia who is not familiar with the concept, and that, ultimately, the goal in academia is not to eliminate masculinity, but to encourage diverse perspectives in games (Chess and Shaw, 2014). This example demonstrates some of the
ways ideologies are negotiated within the work of academia and how academics are not separate from the world they study.

A trek through cultural studies provided some background into ideology, culture, and polysemy, laying groundwork for the intersectional and political work of feminist media studies. Relying on what was available, feminist media studies took inspiration from methods such as those in cultural studies, psychoanalysis, and content analysis. Today, feminist media studies is a robust area of research with an emphasis not only on gender but intersectionality and a feminist sensibility. As will be evident in the next section, feminist media studies in general underlies my approach to game studies.

**Game Studies**

One place feminist media studies has had a significant impact is in game studies, taking root as feminist game studies. In the following section, I will discuss the gamer identity, briefly outline the foci of game studies as a whole, examine masculinity in game studies, introduce the feminist game studies approach, and explore the feminization of casual games.

Games have long focused on certain conceptions of men and boys as their primary audiences and facets of game studies literature have contended with those conceptions. Early gaming culture, such as what took place in video game arcades, was essential to restricting and shaping today’s modern gaming culture (Kocurek, 2012). A journey through game studies shows that “gamer” is a deeply invested identity, unmatched by other forms of media consumption (Chess and Paul, 2019). However, as the term gamer evolved as a specific identity, many players did not feel specifically interpellated by the term because of its geeky stigma. Many therefore chose not to
identify with it (Shaw, 2011). The idea of gamers as a cultural concept, then, is deeply tied to identity, but that identity is too often limited and constrained by intersection identities from masculinity to general nerdiness.

Game studies as an area of study has perhaps been over-focused on massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), first person shooters (FPS), and role playing games (RPGs). FPS especially have been a central foci of game studies scholars researching expressions of masculinity in games (Chess and Paul, 2019). As early as the shooting games at the arcades, violent videogames like these are partially responsible for the association of gaming with boys and men and have thus helped normalize games as masculine (Kocurek, 2012). In terms of contemporary gaming, Blackburn (2018) explored the military realism in Call of Duty, a popular FPS, and found that the realism lies not in the game itself, but when the player steps into the role of a soldier and performs a certain form of hegemonic masculinity that is expected of US soldiers. While I mentioned previously that the gamer identity presumes a specific male individual, that does not mean that all forms of masculinity are acceptable as part of the gamer identity. The specifically technologically-oriented technomasculinity that pervades this type of game serves as a barrier for women and those expressing other forms of masculinity to enter spaces where games are both played and made (Johnson, 2018). Games may be for boys, but not all boys. Instead, many game manufactures target only the boys who are able to conform to the specific technomasculine identity that is preferred by gaming culture.

Despite the longstanding association of video games with boys and masculinity, people of marginalized genders, too, have always played games. When they were first
introduced, video games were family consoles, played by girls just as much as they were by boys (Kocurek, 2012). And yet, feminist game studies is about more than just counting girl gamers. It “examines how gender, and its intersections with race, class, sexuality, and so on, is produced, represented, and consumed, and practiced in and through digital games” (Gray, Vorhees, and Vossen, 2018, p. 1). Echoing the feminist mantra, Chess (2009) explains “the playful is political” (p. 13) expressing that there is an active politics in play. Through a feminist game studies perspective, games articulate hegemony; in other words, games embody dominant ideologies and disseminate those ideologies to their players (Gray, Vorhees, & Vossen, 2008). Feminist game studies further has an “ethical, political imperative…: the inclusion of women and other marginalized people in games and game cultures is fundamentally about justice, parity, and access to common (media) experiences that connect us” (Gray, Vorhees, & Vossen, 2008, p. 5). There is important critical, intersectional work at the heart of the perspective. In all, feminist game studies is critical and intersectional, and seeks to identify and engage with the ideologies embedded in videogames and videogame discourses.

One place feminist game studies can be helpful to make sense of the world is in the feminization of casual games. The labels “hardcore” and “casual” first came to describe games in the mid-1990s as general descriptors of gameplay rather than value judgements about the quality of a particular game (Chess and Paul, 2019). Hardcore typically referred to console games (such as PlayStation or Xbox) and usually certain genres such as FPS, MMORPG, and Fighting Games (Chess and Paul, 2019). These games involved a great deal of energy to play as they had a high difficulty level (Chess and Paul, 2019). Casual, on the other hand, usually referred to portable games (such as
the Nintendo DS) and included family-centric games and genres such as Time Management Games (such as Gamelab’s *Diner Dash*), Hidden Object Games (Eipix Entertainment’s *Mystery Case Files*), and Puzzle Games (King’s aforementioned *Candy Crush*) (Chess and Paul, 2019). These games can be played as the player’s schedule allows and are usually inexpensive or free to play (Chess and Paul, 2019). Ultimately, many games fall between hardcore and casual, and the differentiation holds little importance outside of distinguishing the time it may take to play a game, or what kind of technology the game requires.

Casual games are dismissed by game audiences based on the questionable belief that they do not take the same work or skill to play that hardcore games do. In this view, games are only worthwhile if they require some skill or discipline to play them. Women’s play in particular is taken less seriously by many game audiences than is men’s, and that can be seen in the case of casual gaming (Chess, 2009). Chess (2009) notes that women’s play is often seen as “frivolous” by gaming communities and feminists alike, which relates back to the distinction between casual and hardcore discussed above. Just like other forms of media that are designed for women, or that women take interest in, casual gaming is demeaned and dismissed in these arenas (Chess, 2017).

Just as girls have always played games, so have queer individuals. However, it is only as it has come to reflect capitalistic concerns that game companies have come to recognize the value, or, indeed, the existence of queer players (Ruberg and Shaw, 2017). Queer readings of video games offer new perspectives, and game developers should represent queer individuals because they are players with real lived experiences that are not always depicted outright. Feminist games scholars also recognize the potential in
taking a queer approach to games (Ruberg and Shaw, 2017). Thus, there is a good deal of overlap in the scholarship in terms of critical approach and intersectionality, at least as far as the intersection of gender and sexuality is concerned. The queer game studies perspective is tasked with, “providing a valuable framework for interrogating the very systems that structure the medium, queer thinking has the potential to simultaneously destabilize and reimagine videogames themselves” (Ruberg and Shaw, 2017, p. 1). This kind of thought allows game scholars and players alike to question what we believe to be natural about videogames, interrogate why that is so, and think of new possibilities for play.

Ultimately, feminist game studies takes a critical and intersectional approach that privileges videogames as sites of struggle worthy of study. The lens offered by feminist game studies allows for a deeper look at mobile games not as casual or frivolous games, but instead as serious texts that have inherent scholarly merit. Next, I will review the extant literature on mobile games.

**Mobile Games.**

Consoles have long offered portable variants, like Nintendo’s Game Boy in the late 1980’s, and those games have evolved into the mobile console variant of today’s Nintendo Switch, but my analysis will focus on mobile phone games specifically. This is because platforms such as the Switch are more “portable” rather than “mobile” consoles, and therefore require console-specific knowledge as key to their design (McCrea, 2011). Games on mobile phones have been a staple for almost as long as the phones themselves, many fondly remembering sessions of *Snake* on the brick-like Nokia 3310 (Anderson, 2018). The design and functionality of mobile games is a reflection of their place in the
recent history of gaming. Many games such as Rovio’s now massive franchise *Angry Birds*, a side scroller where the player must launch birds at precarious structures with a sling shot, have a two-dimensional aesthetic that reflect early classics like Atari’s *Breakout*, an arcade game that involved using a horizontal bar of pixels to break through a line of bricks at the top of the screen (Anderson, 2018). Mobile games have been around as long as phones have been able to handle them, providing games to mobile phone users who might otherwise not engage in such forms of digital play. This trend began long before smartphones were even on the market.

As we continue to consider this discussion on mobile games, we must remember that mobile games may not be limited exclusively to what is traditionally considered a “game” and may in fact even extend to the playfulness seen on social networking and other apps (Wilson et al. 2011). This is because the mobile phone in particular marks a ludic turn for playfulness in applications (Richardson, 2011). Ludic is a term which means playfulness, so ludic activities are playful activities (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). As we see more technological potential for mediated play, we are also likely to see more playful behaviors embedded in other mechanics of non-leisure-based contexts (Mäyrä, 2012). Because of this, it is important to remember that not all conversations about gaming are limited to games in the traditional sense, as we may miss out on the pervasiveness of playfulness and gamification (Mäyrä, 2012). Mobile gaming especially tends to be more associated with ludic practices as a whole rather than the traditional “magic circle,” which starkly delineates the real world and the game world (Richardson, 2011). It is possible that this new turn toward a culture of playfulness comes from a rise in self-reflexivity in the face of uncertainty, or possibly as a challenge to the widespread
culture of efficiency (Mäyrä, 2012). While this context is important for understanding the current modes of gameplay, mobile gaming is still traditionally focused on games meant to be played on cell phones.

Like any activity, players turn to mobile games for different reasons. Above all else, they may simply be looking for an activity to entertain themselves for a short period of time. This is, in fact, a primary defining factor of the gameplay of mobile games (Lin, 2014). Reasons may not vary much from console or computer games, and players may be compelled to play to complete game-specific objectives, just as they would with console or computer games (Kari, 2016). Because mobile games are housed on players’ mobile devices which are constantly updated with new and exciting technologies, players may be interested in using the games as an accessory through which to explore, such as the innovative capabilities of augmented reality and hybrid reality games (Serrano et al., 2017). The game’s features may also use phone function for gameplay, such as social media or the phone’s pedometer, and gamify these functions (Kari, 2016).

Handheld consoles like the Nintendo 3DS often require more demanding play and have fixed buttons and play positions that can make play uncomfortable (Anderson, 2018). On the other hand, mobile games by design have the ability to be played anywhere, can be started and stopped whenever the player chooses, and may require less involvement than console or computer games, even than handheld console games (Lin, 2014). As they are designed to be interrupted, games may take little commitment to learn to play (Anderson, 2018). Mobile games are often simple and easy to use by design (Wilson et al., 2011). Additionally, mobile games take less investment to learn and play than console games, and players can learn about a game and download a game within the
same moment (Anderson, 2018). There is also on average less of an upfront cost compared to console and computer games, as most mobile games are either free or only cost a small amount (Anderson, 2018). It is also the characteristics that make them casual that make them so diffuse. The eventual move toward smartphones indicated a massive growth in audience for games (Chess, 2017). Not despite their casual characteristics, but because of their accessibility have mobile games seen such mass appeal (Wilson et al., 2011). “Casual” may have been a term used to disparage the legitimacy of mobile games, but as we can see, casual play has also served to get mobile games into the hands of more players.

The way casual is used to cheapen the value of mobile games may also be related to their common association with women players. More recent games are associated with a “feminine ethos of leisure” that does not always look like traditional play and is often written off by the games industry (Chess, 2017). For instance, Chess (2009; 2017) often gives the example of asking her mother what kind of game it would take to get her to play a video game, to which her mother responded, perhaps a nice shopping game. Chess (2009) notes that the consumerism and frivolity of such a game would lead it to be dismissed as a casual game, and not worth playing. Just as with other forms of media, mobile games that appear to be made for women—whether or not it is actually women who play them—are viewed negatively and tend to be dismissed by hardcore game audiences (Chess, 2017). Thus, mobile games are often overlooked in conversations about video games, but they offer new and unique modes of play.
Mobile games and space

Because of the greater flexibility offered by mobile gameplay, players are able to make use of space in new ways. If mobile games follow a history of console and computer gaming in their aesthetic and play, then they also owe a lot to activities such as parkour—an activity that involves overcoming obstacles in urban environments through movement—in the way that they transform urban spaces into play spaces (De Souza e Silva and Hjorth, 2009). This is because some mobile games, such as augmented reality and hybrid reality games, may take place in both virtual spaces and physical spaces concurrently (De Souza e Silva, 2009). In doing so, mobile games create “hybrid spaces” where players are not fully inhabiting a virtual or physical space and instead blurring together the physical and online spaces (De Souza e Silva, 2008). In this way, mobile games give us a new understanding of space (De Souza e Silva and Sutko, 2008). Hybrid reality games, for instance—those games that take place in both the virtual space and the physical world by mapping virtual elements onto corresponding physical locations—change the way we move through urban spaces by encouraging us to move through cities in new ways and traverse new areas (De Souza e Silva and Sutko, 2008). This is due to the way mobile games can reprioritize spaces, such as turning city landmarks into important gameplay elements (Apperley and Moore, 2018). Any space can be transformed, and the implications may be carried to education where games such as hybrid reality games can be used to transform classroom spaces to facilitate learning and promote cooperation amongst students (De Souza e Silva and Delacruz, 2006).

By changing the way players see these spaces, mobile games also change the function of these spaces to places of play and mix “playful and ordinary spaces, as well
as public and private spheres” (De Souza e Silva and Sutko, 2008, p. 458), thus resulting in a blurring between the public and private, playful and ordinary (De Souza e Silva and Hjorth, 2009). Employees may choose to play games at work, and games blur social spaces the same way checking emails at home does—playing a game at work when the employee is meant to be performing work behaviors turns a work space into a play space, and this has implications for our quality of life (De Souza e Silva and Sutko, 2008; Anderson, 2018). Mobile games can then be a mode of resistance, infiltrating the workplace and aiding the employee by behaving in a particular way that is incongruous with work expectations (Anderson, 2018).

As much as mobile games have the capacity to transform our relationship with space, most mobile gameplay is not literally mobile, and in fact, mobile games are mostly played at home (Chan, 2008). There is a gap between how we understand the intended and actual usage of mobile games in this way (Chan, 2008). Traditionally, players of console games would camp out in the living areas where the television was located, and computer gamers were tethered to a desktop, while mobile gamers have the freedom to bring their games comfortably to the bedroom, a primary location of mobile game play (Chan, 2008). Thus, despite the freedom of movement offered by the technology, mobile games still tend to be more frequently associated with certain spaces by players (Chan, 2008).

Where mobile games also give more freedom of spatial movement, they also give more freedom of corporeal movement. Players’ bodies play an important role in their gaming experience because in mobile games, they have the most bearing on when, how, and where the game is played since the games are not physically tethered to any singular
location (Anderson, 2018). For example, in the game *Pokémon GO*, players must move to real world locations to receive many gameplay benefits. By definition, mobile games make gaming bodies mobile because they can travel with people for long periods of time without needing to connect to a power source, allowing bodies to travel great distances while gaming (Anderson, 2018). The combining of controller and game into one handheld device gives players more freedom to decide how they want to hold their body while playing the game (Anderson, 2018). Other forms of mobile gaming such as the Nintendo Switch have controls physically attached to the game’s controller, restricting play and confining the players’ hands to certain actions to operate the game (Anderson, 2018). This structured range of movement also impairs accessibility for players with limited mobility (Anderson, 2018). Individual games rather than physical devices may be the deciding factor that encourage certain body positions over others (Anderson, 2018). Without the material limitation of fixed buttons, players are freer to think about how they would like to hold their bodies during gameplay (Anderson, 2018). An unintended consequence of this freedom of mobility is that players may ultimately choose body positions that lead to more physical discomfort after extended play sessions (Anderson, 2018).

As I have already mentioned, one aspect of mobile games that is unique is that their gameplay is designed so that it may be picked up and put down on a whim. There are more ways mobile games are unique in terms of their temporality. For example, mobile games made for mobile consoles would usually mimic the difficult gameplay that was stringent in terms of time commitment and player focus (Anderson, 2018). In this way, mobile games are more temporally playful than their console-based predecessors.
Players of mobile games may play in more sporadic play styles, with total sessions that last throughout the day but that are interrupted by various domestic and work-related tasks (Anderson, 2018). Mobile games cater to these specific play styles and are often made to be played in such a way so that they can be enjoyed in short bursts (Anderson, 2018). This quality of mobile games also makes it possible for players to effectively multitask, using their time for both gaming and other tasks simultaneously (Anderson, 2018). Further, individual games may be turn-based but not rely on any mechanic that limits time they make for their turns (Anderson, 2018). These games grant players a temporal flexibility that increases players agency (Anderson, 2018).

If one attraction of mobile games is that players do not have to sink a lot of time into them, another is that there is little to no up-front cost. This may be what has led to mass distribution of the games (Wilson et al., 2011). However, transactions can get costly over time, as a growing trend in gaming as a whole has been the rise of in-app purchases—transactions that take place after the initial download of the game for additional downloadable content (DLC) in the form of new items or even story content. Otherwise free games may contain in-app purchases built into their gameplay where players are required to either wait an arbitrary period of time before they are allowed to continue play or they may pay the fee to hasten the process, which many players opt to do (Anderson, 2018). Another way cost can theoretically inhibit enjoyment of mobile games is through the price of peripheral items such as the price of the handset or the cost of mobile services (De Souza e Silva, 2008). Mobile games may be deceptively inexpensive or free at first glance, but upon further analysis, the cost of playing such games can come
at a real financial cost to players, one that should not be overlooked and even puts some mobile games on par with console games.

In addition to the cost of mobile games and in-app purchases throughout, another place mobile game developers stand to make a profit off of their product is through advertising. In a 2014 study, Lin found that players who felt more positively about the game they were playing also felt more positively about the product being advertised. Later recall of those brands was improved when players were more familiar with the brands advertised in the games (Lin, 2014). Recall was also improved when the brands were advertised in a central location, such as in a place that impacted gameplay directly (Lin, 2014). For example, by putting an advertisement on the ball in a bowling game, players were more likely to be able to recall the associated brand. Players that additionally had positive attitudes about product placement were more likely to go on to purchase the advertised products after playing the game (Lin, 2014). Positive feelings when playing and a central location, then, lead to better recall and a greater likelihood of purchase, stretching the financial gains of mobile games to include peripheral products that are advertised on them.

A possible concern of mobile games is that of the surveillance of the players, and mobile games may challenge the way we think about safety and security in gaming. For some users in De Souza e Silva and Sutko’s (2008) study, the possibility of surveillance from their gameplay was a positive consequence, creating a feeling of not being alone. In some mobile games, users may be anonymous online, but visible to other players in person and thus vulnerable to surveillance (De Souza e Silva, 2009). With this dynamic, games may create a sense of panopticism in players, but they may also raise awareness to
the continuous potential of being surveyed (De Souza e Silva and Sutko, 2008). The surveillance creates a generally positive feeling of playing with others amongst players, but the panopticism it creates can also lead to a power differential amongst players surveying one another.

In all, mobile games are devalued by critics because of their association with who plays them, but the reality is many people enjoy playing mobile games for a variety of reasons. Mobile games are playful not only in the traditional sense but temporally and spatially and allow mobility not afforded by console gaming. Further, mobile games blur lines, like those between public and private, work and play, surveilled and surveyor. There is a need for more research on mobile games, but the current literature points at the richness possible when such a feat is undertaken. In the next section, I will cover the literature on games and player identity.

**Games and identity**

While mobile games are under-researched compared to hardcore games, the relationship between player identity and games is even less understood. In the following section, I discuss the relationship between players and identification, as well as Chess’s (2017) concept of designed identity.

The role of identity in games is thought to at once be different from and similar to the role of identity in other media. This is because players at once construct and express identities while simultaneously distancing themselves from their identities (Mäyrä, 2012). This blurs the lines between what parts of the person’s identity are play and which parts are factual (Mäyrä, 2012).
Identification with videogame characters can be different for players than identification with other media characters, and the level of background story has an impact as well (Shaw, 2014). The process is the same as in other media, but Shaw (2014) found that many players do not understand identification as a necessary element for gameplay (Shaw, 2014). In fact, the players from marginalized groups she interviewed believed representation of marginalized groups was unimportant to their gameplay experiences (Shaw, 2014). Players closely related the terms identification and representation, seeing them as very similar, if not the same concept, and players were more concerned with seeing themselves in the characters rather than seeing any specific identity such as race, class, or gender (Shaw, 2014). In this way representation is not important solely in the ability of media audiences to seek identification with characters in media texts (Shaw, 2014).

There is a difference between the actual identity of players and the identity that games assume of their audiences. When game designers create games for their imagined audiences, they often apply certain perceptions of identities rather than the real, lived experiences of people. This is called designed identity (Chess, 2017). When developers design games for the designed identity of players, they design games for how they think the games should be played, not how they actually play the games (Chess, 2017). Games that are designed for a specific identity in this way rely on stereotypes and expectations (Chess, 2017). For instance, Chess (2017) gives the example of a peripheral knitting machine from Nintendo that was advertised but never released in the 1980s. The toy targeted girls but it is entirely possible that many other demographics may have enjoyed such a toy, such as women who knit or craft-minded boys and men.
There is research on different facets of identity and how that ties into gaming, for instance the multitude of research on gender and representation in games. However, the research on the relationship between player identity and games is almost nonexistent outside of discussions of who adopts the “gamer” identity. Moving forward, I will be discussing audiences and different interpretations of value.

**Audience and value.**

With the mobile games and identity pieces situated within the cultural studies and feminist media studies puzzle, I can now move on to how the value piece fits. In this section, I first define how I have conceptualized value in this study, before moving on to different ways media have been legitimated historically.

The idea of value resists a standard definition and varies depending upon the context and audience. One understanding of value is through an economic lens (Skeggs & Wood, 2012). For instance, a game costs $39.99, and so its market value is $39.99. The numeric assigned to the media becomes the value assigned to it by creators, and the value that audiences might compare against as they consume the media.

The second way we can understand value is as some benefit audiences are extracting from the games (Skeggs & Wood, 2012). The audience consumes and evaluates the media based on their experience. In the days of the video game arcade, players could extract more value from games by playing longer thus getting more game for the same amount of money (Kocurek, 2012). This meant that the most skilled players were able to extract the most value. Specifically, “the better an individual plays by the [game’s] rules, the more value he or she receives for his or her financial expenditure” (Kocurek, 2012, p. 31). The money invested into the games was not just an investment in
play time, however, as it also resulted in improved skills and status (Kocurek, 2012). Today, mobile games in particular are not seen as games that *players* are able to extract value from by critics, and games journalists dismiss them as cheap attempts to turn a quick profit by developers (Chess and Paul, 2019).

Finally, when we say that audiences construct mobile games as valuable, we can also say that they are legitimating mobile games. Legitimating media entails acceptance by a more “elite” audience, and in doing so reinforces cultural hierarchies about what media is culturally legitimate (Newman and Levine, 2012). This may differ based on generation, education level, sex, gender, and household income (Hermans and Gyldensted, 2019). Additionally, age, gender and household income are considered especially important in determining how an audience constructs value as they are most linked to media and consumption habits (Yang and Coffey, 2014). Legitimacy for media texts may be self-contained arguments for importance meaning the existence of a media text may be an argument for its own legitimacy (Larsen, 2010). Movies, for instance, gained legitimacy through the act of French intellectuals writing manifestos to one another (Pelletier, 2018). The cultural hierarchies necessary for the justification of legitimating a media form like television means denigrating certain television along lines of class, gender, age, race, region, and more (Newman and Levine, 2012). Soap operas, for instance, are dismissed for their feminized form but Modleski (1979) points out their narrative hermeneutic legitimates their serial form when it is applied to more masculine storylines. Thus, the process of legitimization is also, effectively, one of masculinization (Newman and Levine, 2012). Incidentally, television scholarship (like games scholarship)
also legitimates television, but it can bring a cultural studies sensibility to the way that popular culture is a site of struggle over taste and value (Newman and Levine, 2012).

To summarize, value can be extracted in multiple ways, either financially or socially, and it is often created through the process of game play. When it comes to legitimation, who perceives media as legitimate can differ based on a variety of factors, and legitimacy is based on cultural hierarchies that are reified time and time again.

**Games, identity, value**

Despite the paucity of research into the relationship between video games and player identity specifically, a review of literature on video games shows that identity has long played a central role to our understanding of them. There are implicit and explicit associations about who is a gamer and who is allowed to play or, as we can see in some cases, who is even able to play. These associations have shaped gaming’s history from the early years until today. From the video game arcade to the aftermath of events like GamerGate that leave some players excluded from communities, identity is central to the way video game audiences engage with their media. Likewise, games have always been intrinsically linked to their perceived value: early gamers were seen as very skilled if they could extract more value from their games, that is, getting more game for paying less money, and today’s gamers can extract value by paying a fee. This contrasts with the arcade gamers who would extract value from their skill. The connections between the literatures I have discussed here therefore raise questions about how these factors might work together to frame issues of identity and value for players of mobile games.
Chapter 3

Methodology

In this dissertation, I am interested in investigating the relationship between the constructions of identity and value in mobile games. As discussed in previous chapters, games are constructed with certain kinds of players in mind. However, the relationship between players and the games they play, and how those players construct value in mobile games in particular is not well understood. This dissertation addresses this gap in knowledge by asking: How are identity and value constructed in mobile games?

To answer this research question, I apply mixed methods. Specifically, I conduct a rhetorical analysis to understand the text, then conduct a reception study to understand the way audiences use that text. By combining both audience-centered and text-centered approaches, I am able to answer questions related to both how audiences construct identity and value in mobile games and also how identity and value are constructed by mobile games themselves. Whenever investigating questions of audience and text, it is possible to fall victim to either the extremes of textual determinism, in which individuals are understood as completely at the whims of the media they consume, or the “excesses” of active audience theory, in which individuals have utter control over their media activity (Sender, 2012, p. 7). Using a dual approach adds nuance that is not possible to achieve from any singular method (Sender, 2012). Thus, such an approach can add balance and difference in perspective that would not otherwise be possible.

Game studies methodologies

Game studies is highly interdisciplinary, and so a number of approaches fall within the game studies umbrella. Game studies research tends to focus on three main
areas, which Ruberg and Shaw (2017) define as, “Community/cultural research, textual analysis, and design studies” (p. xiv). That is, researchers may engage with audiences, they may choose to examine the games themselves from a textual perspective, or they may take a behind-the-scenes industry perspective. As I am using both an audience-centered and a text-centered approach, my own research project is well-aligned with the work in game studies.

The feminist game studies project in particular offers useful tools when we want to talk about mobile games as a starting point for an individual’s construction of identity and value. This is because, as I detailed in the previous chapter, feminist game studies scholars view games as instruments of hegemony (Gray, Vorhees, Vossen, 2008). Scholars such as Shaw (2014) and Vossen (2018) give more agency to audiences through the work of reception studies, which I will go into more detail in the next section, and autoethnography, respectively. Since these approaches are based in issues of hegemony and agency, games are a prime object of study if we want to understand the culture at large and how games communicate certain ideas through their form and in how audiences understand them—whether those ideas are accepted or rejected, or whether they are understood in the way they are intended. Likewise, Bogost (2007) points out the importance of studying video games as texts and, more importantly, as products of their creators.

Being grounded in feminist media studies, feminist game studies also provides the historical grounds to contextualize the dismissal of mobile games, the feminization of casual games, and the importance of identity politics when discussing these issues. Scholars like Modleski (1979) and Radway (1982) study the way genres of feminine
desire and feminine stereotypes are dismissed (Chess and Paul, 2019). Now, in game studies, Chess (2011) and Shaw (2014) have paved the way for discussions of the feminization of casual gaming, representation, and identity.

To reiterate, methodologically, a majority of feminist games studies research views games as embodying ideologies and so textual analysis tends to be the dominant approach, because it allows scholars to identify those ideologies within the games themselves (Chess, 2017). On the other hand, audience studies offer a way of understanding how those ideologies are received and interpreted by the actual audiences who interact with the game texts (Shaw, 2014). Both of these approaches align with feminist media studies because of the specific ways they engage with culture and ideology, as feminist media studies is a critical approach that takes its cues from cultural studies. In the next sections, I will explore in more depth textual analysis (in my case, rhetorical criticism) and reception studies in turn.

**Rhetorical criticism**

Traditionally, the realm of rhetoric has focused on oratory, and many still find rhetorical methods and mobile gaming to be an unusual combination. A text is rhetorical when significance is imparted upon it by its audience; for instance, brush stroke upon a canvas may not necessarily be rhetorical until we decide together that the stroke has a particular shared meaning (McKerrow, 2015). Further, while language is important to the art of rhetoric, it is persuasion that is central to rhetoric; even visual images are capable of argumentation (Bogost, 2007).

The “ideological turn” in rhetoric is where the interests of media studies and rhetorical studies find much of their common ground. Ideological criticism, “insists on a
historical perspective in relation to cultural artifacts and political artifacts” (Wander, 1984, p. 199), meaning that context is important for understanding the rhetorical artifacts being studied. Ideological criticism as a method is “a way of organizing materials” (p. 204) rather than an “instrument of discovery” (p. 204) and Wander (1984) argues for a holistic approach that includes text and context. Virtually any artifact can be used for an ideological criticism because anything can contain an ideological position (Foss, 2009). When carrying out an ideological criticism, the goal is to analyze the artifact and identify rhetorical elements which give clues to its ideology (Foss, 2009). This process begins with coding the artifact for ideological themes (Foss, 2009). Ultimately, an ideological criticism should conclude by determining the functions of the ideologies identified (Foss, 2009).

Ideological criticism, then, demands that rhetorical criticism is more than merely a “technical exercise” (Wander, 1984, p. 201). Understanding the ideologies embedded in texts is key to understanding the cultural forces that shape those ideologies and, in turn, shape the texts. Because of this, ideological criticism is well-suited to the critical sensibilities of the cultural studies approach, and therefore pairs well with reception studies.

**Reception studies**

In response to mass communications research that heavily conceptualizes media texts as one-way exchanges that inundate audiences, reception studies research is conducted specifically in the interest of active audiences. Hall (1973) speaks of an “exciting phase in so-called ‘audience research’” (p. 120), as he introduced a new model for understanding the way audiences interpret messages, one in which audiences are
active participants in the process of interpretation. Hall (1973) explains that the media producers who encode messages are informed by ideologies, just as those audiences who decode those messages embedded with ideologies. Therefore, structural differences may prevent messages from being decoded as intended, due to a misalignment in ideologies. Hall (1973) contends that there are at least three possible ways audiences may decode messages. Dominant/preferred readings are understood as producers intended, negotiated readings acknowledge the dominant reading but make exceptions or allowances, and oppositional readings actively reject the dominant reading (Hall, 1973). While reception studies do not all necessarily deal with the minutiae of identifying these specific positions in their audiences, it is this understanding that lays the groundwork for studying audience reception.

Radway (1984) looked at how readers of romance novels were not just passive consumers but had specific desires that they sought out in fiction. This is the goal of audience research, which “must tread a treacherous path between textual determinism, which usually assumes that texts do terrible things to people (especially women and children), and the excesses of active audience theory, which celebrates people’s freedom to make what they like of the texts they consume” (Sender, 2012, p.7). Sender (2012) does this, for instance, by critiquing the media itself without dismissing the reasons audiences might enjoy the show. She acknowledges the commercial investments of the media without declaring it totally, irrefutably corrupt, and notes that audiences were often aware of the issues of media commercialism. Huntemann (2010) looked at players’ lived experiences and meaning creation with war videogames and contextualized them in relation to the Global War on Terror, noting that players were distrustful toward the
government and dismissed the idea of joining the Army. Gray (2014) interviewed participants on Xbox Live via gameplay and spoke with women of color about how they actively work to fight back against their marginalization using tools that already exist on the platform. All three of these audiences are influenced by the technology they use, but they are simultaneously active participants in the media they consume and the messages they construct. In summary, examining both texts and how audiences use those texts offers a more complete overview on how texts persuade and how audiences respond to those arguments.

Methods

Because I am interested specifically in how audiences construct value in mobile games, but also more broadly how value is constructed in those games themselves in relation to identity, I take a two-pronged approach to answering my research question: *how are identity and value constructed in mobile games?* The first part of the approach is a rhetorical criticism of a mobile game, followed by the second part, a reception study of mobile game audiences.

Rhetorical criticism

I chose my rhetorical artifact based on games my participants suggested they liked to play. I selected *Pokémon GO* as my artifact as it was the most popular suggestion in reported in my questionnaire. My analysis includes looking for indications in the text that the game is trying to signal value to players. I specifically chose to analyze a game that many players recommend rather than a game the app store claims is frequently downloaded or is very profitable. There is already an impression that casual games such as mobile games have no value beyond making fast money for developers (Chess and
Paul, 2019), so choosing a popular game suggests players already find some value in it. When Radway (1984) spoke with romance novel readers, her participants noted that just because a novel was a best-seller did not necessarily mean it was a quality product to them. While books and games are different media, this principle may apply to my participants as well.

I also looked at clues such as indications of economic value. For instance, in Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp, players occasionally come across Leaf Tickets, a premium in-game currency which can be exchanged for rewards or can be used to speed up gameplay. Leaf Tickets are also available for purchase with real money. Players can purchase 20 Leaf Tickets for $0.99, but the game makes it clear that it is a much better deal to purchase 45 Leaf Tickets for $1.99, adding extra value for the price (Nintendo, 2019). These suggestions are part of the game’s operation, and have an impact on play. In looking at suggestions of economic value, I am looking for the ways value is embedded into the texts of the selected game itself.

With the text selected, I analyzed the game in search of ideological themes. This involves looking for themes in the games procedures. As context is important in ideological criticism, I did not look at these ideological themes in isolation, but rather considered where they appeared and under what circumstances (Wander, 1984). The most dominant ideological themes came together to form the themes of the rhetorical analysis. These themes aided in answering the research question: how are identity and value constructed in mobile games?

In particular, I looked at the arguments made by the game’s procedures. Video games are comprised of a set of procedures, or rules, that structure players’ behavior.
Considering the procedural rhetoric of a game involves interrogating what behaviors a game encourages players to take and what ideologies inform these rules.

**Reception study**

I began the reception study portion by recruiting participants through social media including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr (see Appendix A). Participants first completed a 10-minute Survey Monkey qualifying questionnaire. Links to the questionnaires were shared on my own social media; however, snowball sampling methods expanded the sample size as social media also encouraged sharing posts amongst friends. The administered 12-question survey functioned as a qualifying and demographic questionnaire by asking participants their age, if they play a mobile game, their gender identity, sexual orientation, their race, their occupation, the games they play, and if they would be available for an interview (see Appendix B). This data offered some cursory information about who is playing games and what kinds of games they play. As I was only interested in interviewing adult participants, individuals under the age of 18 were disqualified. I was additionally only interested in interviewing participants who claimed to play at least one mobile game regularly, so participants who answered otherwise were also disqualified.

From the questionnaire, I recruited 30 interview participants for 30-60-minute phone or voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) interviews. I conducted interviews until I reached saturation at 30 participants. According to Morse (1994), Mason (2010), and Baker and Edwards (2012), saturation occurs at about 30-35 interviews, and I found this to be the case in my study as well. These calls were recorded for later transcription and analysis. Interview participants were read a brief informed consent script and then I
began the interviews. I had 13 open-ended, semi-structured interview questions prepared covering topics that included what kinds of games participants enjoy, whether or not participants spend money on mobile games, what makes a mobile game worth playing, and whether they would or would not talk to friends and family about playing certain games (see Appendix C). The interviews were semi-structured to allow for organic conversation to lead to answers that I had not anticipated in the formulation of my questions (Cresswell and Poth, 2018). Participants were also asked to choose a pseudonym to protect their anonymity, and they are referred to by this pseudonym for the duration of the research. In the event that the participant did not wish to choose a pseudonym, or chose a pseudonym that revealed their identity, I chose a pseudonym for those participants. All pseudonyms and demographic information are included for reference in Appendix E.

After my conversations with the participants were completed, I transcribed the interviews. Then, I coded the transcribed data using the constant comparative method. This involved identifying new codes as they emerged and comparing them to preexisting categories (Cresswell and Poth, 2018). Rather than comparing to a pre-existing set of codes, I compared new codes to data I had already coded to check for similarities. If the data was comparable to data I had already coded, I used the same code. If the data was different enough to warrant a new category, I created a new code. When all of the data was coded, I compared all of the codes and began collapsing coding categories into broader themes. The coded data made up a collection of themes that completely encompass all of the codes within them. This coding process continued until all the data
and themes were completely exhausted. These themes formed the basis of my analysis of the interview data and ultimately assisted me in answering my research question.

With the combination of audience and textual analysis, my goal is to present a more complete picture of the puzzle of value, identity, and mobile games. Each audience and text on their own have interesting stories to tell, but it is together that this information paints the most complete picture.

In the next chapter, I present the results of my rhetorical criticism of Pokémon GO. By analyzing the rhetoricity of the procedures of the game, I argue that Pokémon GO blurs the lines of the magic circle, and that it adopts an aesthetic of causal while arguing for a core mode of play.
Chapter 4
Rhetorical Analysis

If you spend enough time scrolling through the app store on an Apple or Google smartphone, you chance coming across a game that will look familiar to anyone who grew up through the rise of the mobile phone: *Snake 97*. The game’s controls are simple: using up, down, left, and right movements, control the snake character to collect pixels and grow longer, all while avoiding collisions with walls or the titular snake’s own body. The game’s developers claim it’s just as “addicting (and frustrating)” as the original. (*Snake 97*, n.d., para. 1). The game calls back to an earlier time in mobile gaming history, when graphics were minimal, music was 8-bit, and controls were oftentimes infuriatingly unresponsive.

*Snake 97* is a throwback to what is lauded as the original mobile game released in 1997: *Snake*, for the Nokia 6110 (Spence, 2020). *Snake* showed that mobile phones were, in the most basic sense, capable of entering the conversation about gaming, and began a fervent interest in what mobile games could be (Fidelman, 2011). As mobile phones increased in their technological abilities, mobile games improved with them: new technology allowed mobile games to handle more information and even connect to the Internet for multiplayer games (Fidelman, 2011). The full color capabilities of phones like Nokia’s Series 40 saw a migration of popular titles like *Tetris* and *Pac-Man*, and well-known game producers like Namco and Sega began to create for the new mobile platform as well (Langshaw, 2011).

When the iPhone was released in 2007, the mobile gaming possibilities only increased (Fidelman, 2011). The smartphone pioneer was “the perfect platform for
gaming,” because it offered “high-definition screens, accelerometers, gyroscopes, and touch screens” (Fidelman, 2011, para. 5). The iPhone received information about where in the world it was, how it was being held, and if its screen was being touched; mobile games adapted in turn to these new features. Games like Angry Birds could be played by simply swiping a finger across the phone’s screen, and other games even began to take advantage of the phone’s camera and GPS functions, such as location-based Augmented Reality (AR) games like Ingress.

In this chapter, I argue that mobile games blur the boundaries between game life and real life through their programming. Specifically, Pokémon GO, the game that emerged as most popular in this study’s questionnaire, channels procedural rhetoric to argue for a rhetoric of cooperation and a rhetoric of strength. In doing so, the game adopts an aesthetic of casual play that contrasts with its rhetoric of hardcore (hereafter: core) play. These rhetorics obfuscate the lines between the rules of the game world and the real world. As a result, the magic circle becomes unclear but not entirely erased. It is important to understand this function of the magic circle as it helps up better describe what mobile games do and how they do it.

I will first review literature on procedural rhetoric, the magic circle, mobile games, and Pokémon GO. I will then analyze the procedural rhetoric of Pokémon GO to provide a rhetorical perspective on mobile games, identity, and value.

**Review of Literature**

**Procedural Rhetoric**

Tracing rhetoric is not an exact science, and even in the academy, rhetoric’s journey through American Speech Departments makes a definition hard to pin down
(Leff, 2016). Modern shifts in rhetoric led to an ideological turn and this turn also moved rhetoric more toward “big” rhetoric, meaning a turn away from discrete texts and more toward a rhetoric that could be applied to a wider variety of objects of analysis, so that there could be a rhetoric of more than public address (McKerrow 2015; McGee, 1980). Blair, Dickenson, and Ott (2010) suggest rhetoric may not be discursive in nature at all; rather, rhetoric may be more about, “theoretical stances and critical tactics” (p. 3), and thus rhetorical texts may look more like diverse, meaningful cultural objects (Blair et al., 2010). Rhetoric can take the form of any number of aspects of human creation with the aim to persuade.

One such more recent domain of rhetorical study is procedural rhetoric, the rhetoric of processes (Bogost, 2007). Procedural rhetoric considers the persuasive capacity of processes or rules, especially as they apply to computer programs. While rules are generally thought to limit our behavior, procedural rhetoric considers how rules can be expressive, and, thus, persuasive (Bogost, 2007). Rules can be used to make arguments about how players should or should not do things and do not necessarily need to rely on verbal rhetoric, specifically human language, to do so. Further, while rules in a computer program, for instance, may limit behavior, the restrictiveness of rules depends on how they are programmed (Bogost, 2007). So, if a programmer wants to severely restrict the actions of a person using a program, they can program fewer options, while a program with multiple options may not feel limiting at all. Yet, in both cases, the options available to the user are defined and constrained by the programmer. Bogost (2007) describes a game called Tax Invaders—a parody of the popular arcade game Space Invaders—in which the player controls a picture of President George W. Bush’s head.
Playing as Bush, the player shoots down blocks, which symbolize a tax plan introduced into Congress that was unpopular with Republicans. Bogost (2007) explains that it is not the crude visuals that are especially persuasive, but the player’s embodiment of President George W. Bush literally shooting down the tax plan. Through this embodiment, the game tried to persuade players that John Kerry’s Tax Plan is an enemy that needs to be “shot down” (Bogost, 2007). The player’s assumption of the role of President Bush embodies the ideology in the game in a way that visual and verbal forms of rhetoric cannot, though those kinds of rhetoric may also be part of the game as a whole.

One area in which procedural rhetoric is applied to processes is in video games. While modern games have impressive visuals and rich narratives that a rhetorician could effectively study, it is the processes that make video games uniquely persuasive, and in the study of games, “image is subordinate to process” (Bogost, 2007, p.25). Mailonini, De Poili, and Teli (2018) explain, procedural rhetoric, “emphasizes the idea that the logical framework in which ‘play’ occurs in video games is a communication medium itself” (p. 65). Like the words used in writing a letter or delivering a speech, the rules that inform play are the primary means of communication for video games. The visual aesthetic of games cannot be fully appreciated as rhetorical artifacts without first considering the processes that operate them because procedure is the defining feature of texts like video games. In a movie, for instance, scenes progress along a narrative because the film (digital or otherwise) is cut that way. In a video game, rules define what scenes are shown depending on what actions are taken. At its base level, a video game is a set of rules hidden within images or a narrative. The repetition of actions in games is given value by the player who envisions some meaningful outcome to those actions.
(Matheson, 2015). Understanding this rule-based form of communication is vital to understanding procedural rhetoric.

Games make arguments using “procedural enthymemes,” in which the player fills in a partially constructed syllogism (Jewel, 2011). Aristotle illustrates the form of syllogism in *On Rhetoric*: with a major premise, a minor premise and some conclusion. The common example for this is: all men are mortal (major premise), Socrates is a man (minor premise), therefore, Socrates is mortal (conclusion). The rhetoricity of this case is not in the individual statements, *per se*, but rather in how the statements are connected to one another, and how skillfully the rhetor connects the premises. A game might present a scenario to a player and require the player to make a decision. For example, at the end of *Life is Strange*, the player has a choice to save their friend or save the city. The scenario provides a premise, and the player fills in the conclusion with one of the options. This creates a close relationship between the player and the logic of the game, in which the player’s direct inputs decide the player’s success in navigating successfully within the game’s rules (Jewel, 2011).

Bogost (2007) suggests that procedural rhetoric may be better for exposing underlying political ideologies than verbal rhetoric because in making verbal arguments, one must make strategic moves to connect two causal topics (Bogost, 2007). On the other hand, Bogost (2007) argues, video games only have to represent the argument they want to make through procedures to achieve that goal. So verbal persuasion must take an audience through the argument they are making, whereas procedural arguments compel individuals to embody the process of the argument by changing their behaviors. In other
words, the player embodies the procedures, and thus changes their actions in line with what the game argues.

Procedural rhetoric exposes underlying ideologies that may be contrary to a game’s explicit claims. For instance, the Role-Playing Game *Undertale* invites players to engage in a pacifist playstyle through the design of its controls and makes arguments throughout the game that the player should not play violently (Seraphine, 2018). In the battle tutorial, the character Toriel instructs the player that instead of engaging with combat, they should talk to a training dummy instead. A frog tells the player to have some mercy if a monster antagonizes them. This provides instruction for the rest of the game that talking to enemies rather than fighting them is not only possible, but the desirable course of action. However, in spite of the pacifist message, a violent “genocide” playthrough is still possible and even supported by the game’s mechanics if the player adopts a gameplay style more similar to that of other RPGs (Seraphine, 2018). Thus, the procedural argument is contrary to the textual argument.

According to Bogost (2007), “as an example of procedural systems, the videogame is the only medium of mass appeal across many ages, demographics, and social and ethnic backgrounds that relies on conceptual frameworks—rule-based interactions—as its core mode of signification.” (p.120) Rule-based interactions are not limited to video games and can be found in phone applications or computer programs. Many different audiences are familiar with the kind of procedural-based persuasion that is central to videogames. Videogames are not always as obviously political as other forms of media, or at least Bogost (2007) argues that most videogame audiences do not seem to interpret them this way; many gamers become very upset when they perceive a video
game to be political and believe politics should play no role in video games (Fan, 2020). Examples of this outlook are commonly expressed through complaints about “social justice” agendas in games, often in response to something as simple as a woman character with pink hair or a muscular body. Games are perceived as normally neutral, which is a false assumption: it’s not that videogames are neutral in any way, it is that the rhetoric by which their ideologies function—procedural rhetoric—is a complex network that persuades, in part, by presenting itself as neutral (Bogost, 2007). Bogost (2007) cautions:

> Perhaps today it seems optimistic to claim that video games might offer the most salient locus for discussions of how we think about political problems. But in time, and perhaps not much of it, we will wonder why it took so long to realize that games have been a part of public political discourse all along. And when that time comes, it would be unfortunate for one set of political positions to have so colonized the medium as to taint it for dissenting opinion. (p. 120)

If we fail to acknowledge the politics that underline video games, Bogost (2007) asserts, certain political positions will already be so entrenched in the procedural form that the form might become synonymous with those politics. Because computer games, for instance, seem trivial as cultural artifacts, their persuasive power should not be overlooked. Doing so may even “constitute dangerous negligence” on the part of researchers (Seiffert & Nothhaft, 2014 p. 235).

One place where procedural arguments are highlighted is in news games, the video game equivalent to political cartoons (Treanor & Mateas, 2009). Through the
application of procedural rhetoric, journalists have the potential to create better understanding of editorial pieces in the form of newsgames (Treanor & Mateas, 2009). In engaging with the procedure of the games, players are persuaded by engaging with news content and critiquing the content through gameplay. In some games, the processes associated with play require learning about the issues of the game, such as a game about the oil industry that requires the player to learn about the exploitation of tar sands to make sound decisions (Seiffert & Nothhaft, 2014). In such games, it is not necessarily the visuals or the text that are persuasive, but what the player does in the game, what decisions they make, that have the more persuasive impact. Video games are good for representing complex systems (Bogost, 2007). Understanding procedural arguments can also help us in the future make better procedural arguments (Bogost, 2007). Despite their potential, newsgames have fallen out of favor, but Treanor and Mateas (2009) argue for their comeback as they may be even more persuasive than political cartoons.

Context also plays a role in how we interpret procedural rhetorics. The procedural rhetoric of the game *First Strike*, for example, is informed by context created through paratextual elements like advertisements and reviews (Matheson, 2015). These paratextual elements prepare players to interact with the game’s diegesis in a specific way, influencing players’ relationship to its procedural rhetoric (Matheson, 2015). Likewise, procedural rhetoric does not exist in a vacuum and procedure and narrative can be used together to communicate ideology (Harper, 2011).

To what extent rules define games is a useful conversation to explore because it demonstrates what ideologies are written into a game and how the players is expected to understand their position to those ideologies. In my research, I aim to add to that
conversation by exploring how games use rules, especially in conjunction with other
game elements and related contexts. In the next section, I will explore how rules define
games through the perspective of the magic circle.

The Magic Circle

Any conversation about procedure in games would be remiss without discussion
of the hotly debated “magic circle.” In game studies, the magic circle describes the way
in which the rules that govern the real world are different from those that govern the
game world (Stenros, 2012). The “circle” in the “magic circle” is an imaginary boundary
between these two worlds. This demarcation between play and reality helps to understand
the social and psychological negotiations associated with play (Stenros, 2012). Huizinga
(1938), the originator of the term in relation to game studies, likens the magic circle to a
sacred, temporary place, like a tennis court, a stage, or a courtroom. When you enter a
courtroom, there are specific procedures that must be followed in that space that do not
apply outside; when you step onto a tennis court, the rules of how you attain points is
specific to the game of tennis. In this way, the magic circle is transformative, and creates
a special time and place for play (Stenros, 2012). There is an agreement between players
to adopt the ideological constraints of the magic circle and adhere to the rules.

Rules in particular are at the forefront of how the magic circle is constructed. A
game may have implicit rules that govern play (i.e., you cannot walk through a wall) and
these are the rules that are adopted as the player enters the space of the magic circle
(Scully-Blaker, 2014). A game’s explicit rules define what is actually possible (i.e., you
can walk through this wall if you approach it at a specific angle and perform a specific
action) and are based on the real-world mechanics of the game (Scully-Blaker, 2014). For
example, speed-runners, who try to move through a game as quickly as possible, exploit a game’s explicit rules in order to move quickly through a game: normally, based on the game’s intended mechanics, you should not be clipping through any walls (implicit rule), but speed-runners use the game’s actual mechanics to do so (explicit rule). Speed-runners, who exploit a game’s explicit rules to progress through a game as quickly as possible may be thought to be operating outside of the magic circle, for instance, because their play is defined by explicit rules, what is actually possible (Scully-Blaker, 2014).

The idea of the magic circle brings to attention the self-reflexive nature of play (Myers, 2012). Games come to represent what is outside the circle. They must also be protected from the rules outside, must be encircled (Myers, 2012). What is inside the circle, inside the game, is similar to what is outside but without having to reference it (Myers, 2012) For instance, the game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* takes place in a city that looks like Los Angeles. However, the rules that apply in Los Angeles do not necessarily apply in the game. The game world may resemble the real world, but they do not operate by the same logics. In other words, the game encircled ought to be contained through its rules, but the magic circle is permeable, and the lines between the game world and the real world can blend.

Many scholars since Johan Huizinga have complicated the idea of the magic circle. Taylor (2009) challenges the notion that there should be such a binary separation of virtual and real worlds. In *Play Between Worlds* Taylor (2009) describes an in-person formal fan event for the game *EverQuest* that she argued blurred the lines between game life and real life. It can be difficult to apply the concept of the magic circle in situations where game rules and real-world rules are not always clear.
Malaby (2007) questions whether there is really a separation, such as that described by the magic circle, at all. He explains that games in Ancient Greece, for instance, were directly modeled in and by real life practices, such as poker rules being developed to mirror business rules, and vice versa (Malaby, 2007). However, Malaby (2007) also points out that games are “artifactual,” created specifically to be separate from everyday life. By questioning the pleasurability of games, we can begin to ask questions about which games are more separate from reality, and how boundaries are maintained and breached (Malaby, 2007). Such questions offer new approaches to exploring the magic circle.

Consalvo (2009) argues that when players play, they always bring with them knowledge of the outside world. Since players still have that knowledge, the demarcation between the real world and the magic circle is not so stark. Players have real lives and commitments that they always bring with them to play, and it is gameplay, which is “contingent on the acts of players” (p. 415), that defines games (Consalvo, 2009). For example, when players engage in cheating, their real-world frustration is brought with them to the game world as they try new, disallowed strategies (Consalvo, 2009). Once again, the boundary of the magic circle is not always clear: if people bring their real lives to their play, can it really be said that they leave behind the rules of the real world?

Zimmerman (2012) pushes back against some of these criticisms, explaining that they characterize the magic circle as a formalized structure that completely separates the real and the virtual worlds. Zimmerman (2012) argues that Huizinga mentions the magic circle by name only a scant four times, and it wasn’t until Zimmerman and Salen’s (2003) *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* that the term was thrust into the conversation.
of game studies. This is where it began to transform from ritual space to strawperson argument. The magic circle is not an entirely infallible concept. Still, it offers a useful tool for understanding how games work in the context of player’s lives.

One area where the magic circle is expanded is in pervasive games. Pervasive games, for instance, games that are specifically characterized by the extension of the game space into the real world (like Live Action Role Playing games) (Montola, 2005). Montola (2005) explains that even games contractually bound by the magic circle may be influenced by outside elements, and even more standard games may have a range of pervasive elements. For example, pervasive games might require players to play at a real-life location, and a traditional game, like a trivia game, is influenced by players’ outside cultural knowledge (Montola, 2005). Part of enjoying a game is not consciously thinking about how it works (its procedures), but in the illusion of nonfiction (Montola, 2005).

Conceptualizing how rules define play and define our relationships to games versus reality is a key consideration when approaching questions of value and identity in mobile games. Likewise, understanding how game rules can be persuasive is a good starting place to examine such considerations. Rhetorical elements like the boundaries of the game world, how and when those boundaries are crossed, and how the procedural rhetoric of the game constructs or expands these boundaries can tell us much about how mobile games can be persuasive to their audiences. In the next section, I will review the topic of mobile games in particular.

**Mobile Games**

Whether through their transportation through the magic circle or the new technologies that continue to impact gameplay, mobile games in particular have the
power to shape the way we interact with the world. The accessibility of mobile games has led to mass appeal and established a large public of mobile gamers (Wilson et al., 2011). Players turn to mobile games for a number of reasons such as completing game-specific objectives, exploring new technology, gamifying phone functions, and simply because they are looking for something enjoyable to do (Kari, 2016; Serrano et al. 2017; Lin, 2014). *Pokémon GO*, for instance, gamifies place in the way it tracks players’ real-life steps and turns greater quantities of movement into rewards (Woods, 2020). So, moving to new places becomes a fun activity that embeds Pokémon into players’ everyday experiences.

Mobile games are especially noteworthy for their unique ability to grant players freedom of movement in their play. Portable consoles like the Nintendo DS have rigid buttons that might make play uncomfortable; players’ hands must hold the controller in a particular way which cannot be changed throughout the game. On the other hand, mobile games are easy to use by design (Anderson, 2018; Wilson et al. 2011). In most mobile games, players can configure their hands in multiple ways to tap and swipe at the screen. This lowers the barrier of entry for individuals who may be impeded by more rigid button placements. While the procedural elements of console games may make demands about when and how long they should be played, mobile games are specifically designed to be played anywhere, and can be stopped whenever the player so chooses (Lin, 2014). Mobile games are also less of an investment of both time and money than other games, as they can be learned quickly and dropped whenever the player no longer wishes to play (Anderson, 2018). Mobile games are still beholden to rules that separate them from the
Players can make more use of space in their play with mobile games. Games of the AR and hybrid reality varieties take place simultaneously in physical space and virtual space, thus creating “hybrid spaces” that blur these formerly distinct spaces (de Souza e Silva, 2009). This widens the area of play for players and brings players together in the real world rather than being confined to virtual interactions. Just as games can blur the rules of the game world with the rules of the real world, mobile games are especially poised to blur space and time in the way they map onto the real world.

This more casual style of play, however, also makes mobile games the subject of scorn. In contrast to more traditional forms of play, they are not widely accepted by fans who pride themselves on being “gamers” (Chess, 2017). This is likely because they are often compared to console games, which tend to be associated with the masculinity of hardcore gaming. As a result, mobile games are characterized by a “feminine ethos of leisure” (Chess, 2017, p.4). Because of this, mobile games are often written off as a lesser form of gaming, just as other forms of media that are perceived as being for women (Chess, 2017). As stated previously, there is an imperative in game studies to understand the politics underlying games now before any one political ideology can be entrenched in the procedure of video games as a whole, and feminization of mobile games is one such area.

Mobile games in particular present a unique opportunity for exploring the boundaries of the magic circle because their mobile technology allows more freedom of play than other video games and allows more interaction with the real world as part of
their gaming procedures. Despite this, mobile games are often overlooked because of the feminization of casual gaming and, thus, the feminization of mobile gaming. Likewise, other identities might be attached to mobile games such as those related to class position, race, or ability, and all discussions of gaming carry the weight of the “gamer” moniker. Game procedures are therefore not ideologically neutral, but it is not clear if mobile games make procedural arguments that are related to particular identities, or if these attributes are being assigned to mobile games in spite of their actual persuasive messages.

In the next section, I will review the literature on the mobile game Pokémon GO in particular. This game was the most frequently referenced game in this study’s questionnaire and is therefore the exemplar that I will use in this chapter.

**Pokémon GO**

One such game has had a lasting cultural impact on mobile gamers and was the game most frequently referenced by participants: Pokémon GO. Pokémon GO is an AR game based on the Pokémon franchise, the highest grossing media franchise of all time. Players travel around real-world locations to catch Pokémon, battle in gyms, and trade with friends.

Dominating video game sales charts and boasting an expansive base of dedicated, life-long fans, the Pokémon franchise has been a hallmark of portable gaming since its Japanese release in 1996 (Bainbridge, 2013). The late 90s and early 00s were characterized by a Pokémania amongst young players and Pokémon became a household name (Wells, 2016). The franchise has led the way in portable gaming since its inception, so it’s no surprise that it eventually found its way into mobile gaming in 2016. While not
the first, no *Pokémon* mobile installment has been as popular and has had as much presence in the cultural zeitgeist as *Pokémon GO*.

*Pokémon*’s success capitalizes on Japan’s global exportation of culture beginning in the 1980’s, consisting of technology (such as the Walkman), animation (like the *Sailor Moon* television series), and games (like *Super Mario Bros.*) (Iwabuchi, 2004). Created by developer Game Freak, a company that works solely for Nintendo, the success of the paired Pokémon games and animation in 1996 led to their global export in 1998. The fervor of Pokémania may not be as hot as it once was, but every few years Game Freak come out with a new mainline title, new spinoff games, and new animated adaptations keeping the franchise alive and well.

The idea of the *Pokémon* franchise was born from creator Satoshi Tajiri’s love of bug collection, and so the *Pokémon* games feature collection as a core gameplay mechanic (Bainbridge, 2013). The basis of a mainline *Pokémon* game is always roughly the same: the player, a young protagonist, acquires a Pokémon companion from a Pokémon professor and starts off on a journey to collect the eight regional gym badges (see Appendix D for a game glossary). These badges grant them passage to challenge the Pokémon League, a group of trainers that are regarded as the strongest in the region. Upon defeating the Elite Four and the Pokémon League Champion that comprise the Pokémon League, the player becomes the Pokémon League Champion and the credits role.

Along the way, the player must prove mastery over their rival (usually a childhood friend), thwart a villainous team that aims to steal trainers’ Pokémon, and catch Pokémon to fill their Pokédex, a compendium of all the Pokémon that can be
acquired. The games, while targeted at children, require immense knowledge of the game’s mechanics and diegesis (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2004). *Pokémon* is a series that rewards long-time players who are more familiar with *Pokémon*’s roster and game mechanics and who might have a greater appreciation for easter eggs.

The release of *Pokémon GO* brought *Pokémon* back in a big way that was accessible to many more players. “Pokémon GO to the polls,” cried Presidential Candidate Hillary Clinton in 2016, encouraging a generation that grew up on Pokémon to vote in the election (Grebey, 2016). Effectiveness of her call to action aside, *Pokémon GO* ascended beyond a mobile app to cultural icon. The release of *Pokémon GO* had such an impact on players that the summer it came out is remembered fondly by players as “The Summer of *Pokémon GO,*” a play on “The Summer of Love” (Em, 2016). Even within its own franchise, the gameplay in GameFreak’s first Nintendo Switch titles, *Let’s Go Pikachu* and *Let’s Go Eevee* were heavily inspired by *Pokémon GO.* *Pokémon GO*’s popularity makes it an ideal candidate for circling questions about how mobile games persuade. In order to have a significant cultural presence, players must be persuaded to play the games, and *Pokémon GO* is no exception.

As mobile games transform space for the player as part of player’s entry into the game world, *Pokémon GO* makes a notable impact in conceptions of game space. In addition to space, *Pokémon GO* also transforms how players view publicness (Woods, 2020). Specifically, the game invites people of all kinds to interact with their spaces and gamifies that experience (Woods, 2020). This in turn changes the way players interact with and move through public places (Woods, 2020). In effect, the rules of the game world govern how the player should move through the real world. However, increased
mobility should not be mistaken for engagement, as, “play encourages mobility, but not necessarily engagement; it creates desire, but not necessarily civility” (Woods, 2020 p. 1015). Like most games, *Pokémon GO* can be played privately and competitively. Despite the change in the way players move about the real world as a result of their gameplay, players may just be going through the motions.

Just as players may turn to mobile games for a variety of reasons, players often make *Pokémon GO* their game of choice both for fun and exercise (Kari, 2016). Players of *Pokémon GO* have the most significant experiences, both positive and negative, when they play with others, and especially when they play for themselves (Kari, 2016). Ultimately, *Pokémon GO* is a game that can make exercise more fun for players and may promote more physical activity in players (Kari, 2016).

Many players of *Pokémon GO* are already familiar with the franchise but are especially interested in the AR features of the game (Serrano, Martín-Nuñez, and Gil-Soldevila, 2017). In this way, *Pokémon GO* is different from other retro games, as nostalgia may not necessarily be a driving factor in play (Serrano et al. 2017). Because mobile games are so easily picked up and put down whenever the player chooses mobile games like *Pokémon GO* are an ideal place to experiment with new technology like AR.

Mobile games like *Pokémon GO* are especially well poised to explore the boundaries of the magic circle and how games make rule-based arguments through the way they reimagine space, time, and socialization in gaming. Further, games like *Pokémon GO* are already positioned as important to the identity-formation process of play because they come from beloved franchises that may be reentered with a sense of nostalgia.
Based on the literature on procedural rhetoric, the magic circle, mobile games and *Pokémon GO*, I will argue in my analysis that procedural designs in mobile games can blur the boundaries between game worlds and the real world. In the following sections, I will analyze how players’ relationships to other players, players’ relationship to the real world, the structure of in-game achievements, and the construction of familiarity contribute to further this argument.

**Analysis**

In the following sections, I will explain how rhetorical procedures of cooperation and strength are represented as valuable and centered in the game. Next, I will show how *Pokémon GO* blurs the edges of the game world and reality through AR technologies. Third, I will demonstrate that *Pokémon GO* uses procedural rewards to teach players about the values of strength and commodify elements of the game experience. Finally, I will explore the procedures of identity creation and how they construct a certain kind of player.

**Relationship to other players**

The first way *Pokémon GO* blurs boundaries between real world and game world is in the player’s relationship to other players. As I will argue in this section, this means procedures of cooperative play are emphasized, specific movement in the real world is required for optimal play, adaptation to real-world events is an important procedure, and friendships are valued as something that can be used to get stronger. These qualities combined are indicative of a more hardcore playstyle.

It is entirely possible to play *Pokémon GO* without ever interacting with another player. If a player decides they want to play *Pokémon GO* as a way to motivate their daily
step count, for instance, the game will automatically track their distance walked. Such a player would still gain rewards every Monday based on that distance walked (in increments of 5km, 25km, and 50km), they could place an egg in an incubator, the device used for hatching eggs, and that egg would hatch after 2km, 5km, or 10km, and their buddy Pokémon would still earn Pokémon candies either every 1km, 3km, 5km, or 20km. Such gameplay requires no extra steps from the player, and the game will only need to be opened to collect said rewards. This kind of gameplay may motivate players to be more active and positions the game as something that runs in the background rather than a game that must be actively engaged with. The player receives these rewards whether they open the app or not: the game world does not even have to be entered to play the game, and the game can be played on the terms of the real world’s rules. In this way, the game complicates the magic circle idea, because we typically consider gameplay to be contingent on entry into the magic circle, tacit agreement that we will follow the rules once we begin the game. The game’s procedures do not restrict this play—there is no beginning and end—implying that the game is an accessory to the player’s rules rather than the other way around.

This is further emphasized by peripherals like the Pokémon GO Plus, a bracelet that communicates with the Pokémon GO app and vibrates when a Pokémon is nearby (Naudus, 2016). All the player has to do is press a button on the bracelet, and they may capture a Pokémon. By using real world currency to purchase an additional physical object, the insular player can further bend the rules of the game world to match the rules that govern the real world. However, this possibility is programmed into the rules of the game: the Pokémon GO Plus is compatible with the game, and this sort of play is still
allowed by the implicit rules of the game. Further, this playstyle speaks to an ultra-casual investment in *Pokémon GO*, but the monetary investment into the game is a markedly core approach to such play. Hardcore games, for instance are traditionally seen as expensive, thus requiring more capital investment, while casual games do not require such commitments in terms of either time or capital (Chess, 2018). By incorporating external technology as an extension of its procedures, *Pokémon GO* complicates categories of core and casual play.

That being said, cooperative play is built into the core of the game and many key features may be missed out on if one does not play with friends, acquaintances, or even strangers. By requiring other players to access certain game functions, the game makes an argument that other players are necessary for progress and are integral to your success in the Pokémon world and further that such progress is desirable. To borrow Bogost’s (2007) phrasing, procedural rhetoric offers an understanding of “how things work” (p. 29) and specifically how rules persuade. In this case, *Pokémon GO* makes it a rule to interact with other players, to cooperate, and it persuades the player that such play is necessary for success, because parts of the game cannot be completed without cooperation. However, while this procedure is a standard element of video games, it also complicates his ideas because it blurs the game rules when it necessitates the presence of another player.

This is emphasized in four gameplay elements: choosing a team, participating in raid battles, trading Pokémon with other players, and giving gifts. First, the gameplay element of choosing a team constructs a certain audience based on their choice and compels players to identify with this choice. Second, participating in raid battles argues
that not only is a rhetoric of cooperation necessary for success, but it bolsters strength, and that is something desirable. Third, through trading value is procedurally created for both Pokémon and the relationships between players. Fourth, giving gifts to other players transforms player relationships by assigning them potential monetary value. Finally, the rhetoric of strength is further emphasized in defending gyms, and team identity can be utilized to attain wealth.

**Choosing a Team**

Players in *Pokémon GO* gain levels through different activities such as catching Pokémon or winning 5-star legendary raids. Once a player earns enough Experience Points (XP) to reach Level 5, upon interacting with a Pokéstop, players are prompted to choose a team: Mystic, Instinct, or Valor. Each team has a legendary Pokémon, leader, and play style associated with them: players who are interested in the evolution of Pokémon are encouraged to choose team Mystic represented by the Pokémon Articuno and the leader Blanche; members of team Instinct, represented by Zapdos and leader Spark, are interested in hatching eggs; team Valor is led by Candela and represented by Moltres, and players on this team pursue strength in battle. While any player can choose any play style despite the team they join, joining a team is compulsory for play. The player has their choice between teams but abstaining from that choice is not an option. This communicates that not only is team play necessary for progression, but a certain level of identification with that team is necessary, too, whether it’s because the player likes the color, the Pokémon, or the actual imperative of that team. In doing so, *Pokémon GO* invites players to identify as a certain kind of public. This is a procedural enthymeme in which the player fills in their playstyle for the missing premise, and the conclusion is
that the playstyle is part of their player identity. In other words, they are invited to engage with its rhetoric as a certain kind of audience based on which team they chose.

When describing the process of rhetorical identification, Charland (1987), explains that, “identification occurs through a series of ideological effects arising from the narrative structure of constitutive rhetoric” (p.147). In *Pokémon GO*, identification is constituted through the ideological effects of the mechanical structure of its procedural rhetoric, literally necessitating some degree of identification for play. Through the procedure of choosing a team, players are encouraged to identify with certain ideological modes of play. Whether or not players actually conform to a certain playstyle when playing *Pokémon GO* is not central to the end goal of identification built into its procedures.

Joining a team also has some impact on play, especially in raid battles. Raid battles are events in which a player or group of players work together to take down a stronger version of a Pokémon in order to gain the opportunity to catch that Pokémon. Raid battles can be found at “gyms,” and it is no longer possible to challenge the gym to gain control for the duration of the raid Pokémon’s availability. In a raid battle, fellow players are displayed in a line-up on screen, with their team indicated above their avatars. This can give players an idea of how many fellow team members are participating in the raid, and what kinds of rewards and bonuses they should expect. For instance, if members of Team Instinct contribute the most to the battle in terms of damage output, Team Instinct will receive additional Pokéballs. These can then be used in the following “catch encounter,” which is the screen that players are taken to after the raid ends. By positioning the raid boss’s catch encounter at the end of the event, the procedure of raid
battling indicates the end goal should be capturing the raid boss. This can be an attractive motivation to play with fellow team members, or to encourage friends to join the same team. Likewise, players may be encouraged to raid Pokémon that are in their team’s territory, so to speak, as they will receive bonuses for raiding at a gym held by their team. Introduced by such mechanics is the rhetoric of value: the pursuit of capture is valuable, and it can be bolstered by becoming part of a team.

**Raid Battles**

The game’s procedures require specific movement in the real world in order to achieve the game’s goals, such as in raid battles. *Pokémon GO* is the game that introduced the raid format to the franchise, and this is one more instance in which a connection to other players is emphasized. Raid battles involve facing off against a powerful Pokémon with other players for the chance of capture. In order to participate in the raid battle, players must physically go to the location of the battle (often significant landmarks in physical space, such as a unique sculpture or a popular restaurant) and challenge the Pokémon with a group, comprised either of friends or of other players who have congregated. This kind of nomadic play is especially characterized by mobile games (e.g., De Souza e Silva and Sutko, 2008; Apperley and Moore, 2018; Anderson, 2018) and test the boundaries of their play, confronting the edges of the magic circle.

After the spread of Covid-19, *Pokémon GO* also introduced remote raid passes that can be purchased in the game’s “shop” and allow players to participate in raids from a distance (though they still must be relatively close to the landmark or no raids will appear on their screen). Consalvo (2009) reminds us that players always bring their experiences to the games they play, so it makes sense that there would be such an
external impact on the procedure of the game. However, rather than in a primarily ideological way, *Pokémon GO* must adapt to material barriers to persuasion because the experiences players bring with them are simultaneously ideological and material. For example, players may understand participating in raid battles to be an important part of play but have limited access to populous areas because a pandemic is keeping them at home. Players may wish to overcome these obstacles by purchasing a raid pass but might find the cost to be prohibitive. Players bring material realities to the game world and may experience ideological tension when game does not account for these realities. In order to maintain the veneer of the game world, the rules of the game world need to change to accommodate obstacles to play in the real world. Yet, in spite of outside influences, *Pokémon GO*’s adaptation still preserves the boundary between play and real life. As such, it is important to understand *Pokémon GO*’s procedures as *blurring* the boundaries of gameplay, rather than destroying them entirely.

It makes sense that *Pokémon GO* would adapt in this way since, “play is not considered as an act within or between fixed locations, but a shaping of subjectivity and experience that operates across networks, work and leisure domains and the public and private spheres of the everyday” (Moore, 2011, p.374). Play is not confined to any one domain or location and play shapes the experience and identity of the player. In other words, play is flexible so that players can shape their identities in whichever way they need to. Mobile games like *Pokémon GO* are not rigid by definition and can adapt through the introduction of new procedures that enforce their rhetorics.
Raid battles have a range of difficulty, and more difficult battles yield rarer, even legendary Pokémon, but require more players. For example, three-star raid battles can often be taken on by one person with a strong team but will yield more common Pokémon, while five-star raid battles are almost always legendary Pokémon but can require a group of many players to win. It is possible to challenge a legendary Pokémon as an individual, as there are no explicit rules that prevent this action, but that person will always lose. In this way, just as a player wouldn’t usually try to walk through a wall in a game, there are implicit rules that govern player behavior once they enter the game world, and those rules govern how players should engage in situations like raid battles. Players learn how they ought to play not necessarily through instruction, but through implicit rules that teach what kinds of playstyles are acceptable and unacceptable. These unstated rules are precisely part of how video games like Pokémon GO make their persuasive arguments, specifically, that the behaviors the player adopts are part of the persuasion. Procedures structure our behavior, but they only become apparent when we challenge them (Bogost, 2007). The player is not completely unable to take on the raid battle alone, there is no mechanism that prevents this action, but challenging this procedure makes it more obvious players will learn eventually that this is just a waste of resources.

As stated earlier, players congregate in a waiting room as they wait for other players to join the raid. Once the timer ticks down, the raid begins, and players face off against the raid Pokémon. Players tap rapidly on their screen to attack and try to avoid enemy attacks by swiping. Eventually, players will tap enough times to enable a stronger attack, which does more damage to the raid Pokémon. While some strategy can be
adapted, such as choosing a Pokémon for the battle whose type is strong against the raid
Pokémon, ultimately the most effective way to defeat the raid Pokémon is through
strength. The centering of strength-based rhetorics is more characteristic of masculinized
core play. Through a procedure of strength, the Pokémon GO emphasizes that it is
cooperation with others that allows us to surmount obstacles.

When the raid Pokémon’s hit points reach zero, the catch encounter begins. Each
player is rewarded with their own catch encounter and players are not competing to catch
the same Pokémon. Players are allotted a certain number of Pokéballs with which they
can catch the raid Pokémon, a number that is decided by team membership (Valor,
Instinct, or Mystic) and individual contribution to the battle. The player must catch the
raid Pokémon with the prescribed number of Pokéballs, or the raid Pokémon will flee,
ending the catch encounter. In the catch encounter, players swipe up the phone screen to
throw Pokéballs at the raid Pokémon. This process of battling together and receiving
benefits from playing together changes players’ relationship to strangers by making them
allies in a fierce battle to obtain rewards, and the more allies a player has, the better the
yield of the rewards.

The sense of scarcity adds an immediacy to the battle that comes from player
versus Pokémon rather than competition between player versus player, promotes a greater
sense of cooperation. Because players are not competing for resources, Pokémon GO
largely extolls a rhetoric and ideology of cooperation, constructing an audience that is
encouraged to play together through the rhetorical procedures of the game goals. Even in
the face of player versus player battling, a second player is necessary for such play,
arguing that in the real world, players should cooperate in the face of the shared goal of
battling. As with raid battles, this is not an explicitly stated rule, but players are taught this lesson through trial and error, which seems to be one of the game’s primarily mechanisms of teaching.

Trading

There are two ways that trading informs my argument about how ideological value is constructed in Pokémon GO: value of individual Pokémon and value of friendships in relation to Pokémon trading. First, Pokémon games are driven by a consumerist sense of collectability (Bogost, 2007), but this is balanced with a more socialist narrative of collaboration and sharing. As catching Pokémon is the main impetus for play in Pokémon GO, players have the option to trade Pokémon with one another in order to complete their collection. Trades cost stardust, one of the forms of currency in the game, and the better the relationship between two players, the less stardust a trade will cost. Friendship levels in Pokémon GO include, in order from lowest to highest: Good Friends, Great Friends, Ultra Friends, and Best Friends. A player’s friendship level can be increased through exchanging gifts. Gifts are one way to obtain items including Pokémon eggs, which may contain uncommon Pokémon. Certain kinds of eggs (specifically, 7km eggs) can only be received through gifts, so giving and receiving gifts is a necessary activity for the player who wishes to collect every available Pokémon. When trading with a Good Friend, regular Pokémon (like an average Pikachu that spawned at Starbucks) cost about 100 stardust to trade, while a legendary Pokémon could cost up to one million stardust to trade if the other player has not yet captured that legendary Pokémon (Loveridge and James, 2020). The persuasive effect is twofold: it argues that some Pokémon are more valuable than others, and it argues that relationships
with others can help contribute to the value of game rewards. Specifically, a numeric value is put on friendship. Through this mechanism, the game’s procedures encourage improving interpersonal friendships in the real world to achieve better value within the game.

Second, unlike raids, in which a player can use a remote raid pass to interact with other players, players must be next to each other if they wish to trade Pokémon. Once they are within physical proximity, players go to the friend’s avatar in their friends list and they are given the option to send a gift, battle their friend, or trade Pokémon. The procedure of friendship in this screen defines for the player what their relationships can do for them: help them obtain more items, get stronger, achieve goals. If the other player is not within the requisite distance, the messages “waiting for [player] to be available for trading” and “you can only trade with players nearby” will appear. This system of trading specifically encourages players to turn real-life acquaintances into Pokémon GO acquaintances in order to receive benefits from trading, so that players may complete their Pokédex, the compendium of Pokémon they have encountered and captured. The player completes the procedural enthymeme that other players are necessary for game progression.

Additionally, giving and receiving gifts is one way of gaining XP, which can increase the player’s level. Being at a higher level opens new possibilities to players, such as being able to have stronger Pokémon, or having access to trading. Pokémon GO not only encourages players to have relationships with other players, but to maintain those relationships through different functions of the game. In this way, the rules of the game
world govern how players interact outside of it, blurring the reach of the magic circle and projecting the game’s monetary relationship value onto real life friendships.

In all of these examples, it is clear Pokémon GO centers the relationship between players in unique ways. First, through procedures of joining a team, Pokémon GO centers strength as a value of collaboration. Second, through trading Pokémon, procedures reinforce the value of friendship as something that can be commodified in the pursuit of strength. Finally, by making strength a procedural requirement for obtaining valuable currency, team membership is further emphasized as a type of capital that can be used to achieve goals. Players must understand their relationship through the terms of the game in order to be successful and the procedures of Pokémon GO construct a specific relationship between players: specifically, the procedures of the game emphasize a rhetoric of literal value in cooperation.

**What is “Real”**

Mobile games are not, in fact, based in reality: the way my Pikachu demands berries is not an indication that she really is hungry, but a series of procedures that encourage me to interact with her. AR games like Pokémon GO invite players to suspend reality and view the real world as part of the game world, to adopt the rules of the game as rules of reality. Althusser (2001, p.109) explains that, “ideology is a ‘representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence,” meaning that the ideologically constructed identity is a representation of material conditions. Because identity is based on our relationships to the world around us, a shift in ideological context marks a shift in player identity. Pokémon Go does this in three ways: by placing game objects into real spaces, by assigning new significance to real world
places, and by applying real world logic to game objects. First, it encourages blurring
game boundaries by placing game objects in the real world. Second, it synchronizes its
processes with conditions of the real world. Finally, it argues that the game should be
played according to real-world rules.

First, as *Pokémon GO* is centered around the titular pocket monsters, one draw of
the game is the ability to see those creatures in the real world, or, as it were, transposed upon the real
world. Opening up the app at any given time will reveal the player’s avatar character situated upon a
map based on their real-life location. On this map, Pokémon avatars appear, in larger numbers around
more popular areas and more sparsely in more rural or suburban areas. For example, it would be more
difficult to find even a single Pokémon in a suburb of rural Utah, whereas the local Cedar City
Starbucks would have several, especially due to Starbucks’ collaboration with *Pokémon GO*. The
Starbucks stores were made PokéStops, encouraging players to congregate there to collect items and
Pokémon, and Starbucks even released a special *Pokémon GO* Frappuccino, encouraging
players to order from their stores as part of their gameplay (Starbucks, 2016). Even
though it is not the case in *Pokémon GO*, video games can create critical engagement
with products, but they must connect through procedurality to do so (Bogost, 2007). By
connecting the Starbucks stores to a fundamental procedure of the game—actually going places to obtain rewards—the game argues for the player to go to Starbucks. Going to Starbucks isn’t just a suggestion made by some product placement, but it’s actually made part of the game.

However, going to Starbucks is only part of the rhetoric. First, by drawing the player to Starbucks, the procedures of *Pokémon GO* make an argument of consumption as part of the central goal of gameplay. Whether or not the player actually decides to spend money at Starbucks is not necessarily central to that argument, but the game positions the player with a specific consumer identity. Second, there is a class argument being made about who is playing *Pokémon GO*. While a regular coffee at Starbucks does not cost any more than similar coffeeshop offerings elsewhere, it does cost more than just staying at home and drinking coffee there. The game operates on the assumption that the player has the disposable income to go to Starbucks and the time to spend at Starbucks, constructing a player with a certain class position. Identities in games are ideologically formed through industry conventions and textual constructs (Chess, 2017). The identity of the player is already designed for them through procedures of class and consumerism.

When a Pokémon appears at a place like Starbucks, tapping one of these Pokémon characters on the overworld map triggers a catch encounter, in which the player has an opportunity to catch a Pokémon by placating it with berries and capturing it with a Pokéball. The default mode of these catch encounters takes place in the game’s AR mode, which depicts the player’s surroundings and the selected Pokémon inhabiting those surroundings (see *Figure 1*). The player uses their phone as a viewfinder to find the Pokémon in the environment—usually on the ground in front of the player—and that
phone acts as a lens into the shared reality of the player and *Pokémon GO*. Copier (2005) suggests that there are game rituals which serve as connecting worlds between play and real life. While Copier (2005) ultimately argues that this is reason to leave behind the boundaries of the magic circle as an analytic framework, pairing magic circle with procedural rhetoric enables a different argument. Rather than making the magic circle obsolete, it makes clear the gameplay aspect of intentionally blurring the boundaries. This is a procedural argument that the rules of the game world should inform behaviors in the real world.

The app also reacts to the player’s real-life environment. If a player opens the app at any given time of day, they will find the time of day, weather, and location reflected on their game’s screen. Bogost (2007) explains that this synchronization of the real world and the game world binds the game to the real world and a player’s daily life. Some Pokémon even only occur in certain weather conditions. The Pokémon “Castform,” for example, changes its appearance and attributes based on the weather conditions. This connects the rules of the real world with the rules of the game world, as the two are governed by the same time-of-day and the same weather conditions. So, for instance, the sunny form of

Figure 2. Weather effects. *This Castform was caught on a sunny day, making it the fire type, and the current weather is sunny, so it gets a boost of +2 and +28.* (Source: Niantic)
Castform (see Figure 2) can only be caught when it is sunny out. The weather can also power up certain kinds of Pokémon in battle. Sunny weather, for example, powers up Fire-type Pokémon, while cloudy weather powers up Psychic-type Pokémon. *Pokémon GO* again adapts its own procedures to better match rules of the real world, allowing the player to play on terms of the real world.

Further, there are region exclusive Pokémon that can only be captured on certain continents. In North America, the region exclusive Pokémon is the bull Pokémon Tauros and if players want to catch Tauros, they must visit North America or trade with another player who has one. In either case, the player must physically travel to North America or to the location of another player. Real world locations and circumstances are not just a feature of *Pokémon GO*, but important to gameplay, and in fact, though the rules of gameplay are written in the real world, boundaries to play may extend to the game world. Through the necessity of collecting regional Pokémon to complete the Pokédex, *Pokémon GO* constructs its player’s identity as that of a pop cosmopolitan. Cosmopolitans seek a broader array of cultural experience and escape their locale in such pursuits (Jenkins, 2004). The points where these people meet become “contact zones” (p. 154) where there is a multi-directional dispersal of media (Jenkins, 2004). Through the procedures of trade, Pokémon become agents of pop cosmopolitanism, and the argument put forth by the Pokédex is that this is desirable, which amounts to a certain construction of class identity.

The AR mode featured by *Pokémon GO* has at least one more function, in which players are encouraged to interact with their Pokémon as if they are real creatures that require attention. Players can take photos of their Pokémon in AR so that they inhabit the player’s world, feed them berries, and play with their Pokémon. Photos of Pokémon are
saved to the player’s camera roll and can be shared with friends or on social media. If a player’s buddy Pokémon, the Pokémon that travels alongside them earning Pokémon candies for kilometers walked, has not been fed a berry in a while, a notification will pop up next to their overworld portrait and notify the player they would like a berry, a procedure that pulls the player into the game world. It is a call for the game’s audience to engage with the blurring of boundaries. This rhetoric argues that there is no boundary between game and real world and suggests that this game should be played not with game rules, but with real-world rules. It prompts the player to go into AR mode to feed the buddy Pokémon, engaging with their Pokémon and heeding the game’s call.

*Pokémon GO* blurs boundaries between the game world and the real world and even suggests play should take place on real-world terms. In doing so, the game constructs a certain kind of public for its gameplay, one that has economic capital to invest in gameplay, and one of pop cosmopolitanism. This identity is not just argued for by the games procedures but deemed necessary for progression and completion.

**Little Achievements**

Mobile game players do not necessarily need a lot of time to play their favorite games. There are a few mechanics in *Pokémon GO* that create a procedure structure that rewards players for even small-time investments. This primarily comes in the form of completing research objectives, catching Pokémon, and battling other players and non-player characters. First, players are encouraged to complete research objectives and rewarded for that behavior. Second, *Pokémon GO* disciplines players through the procedures of catching Pokémon, training players on what are desirable and undesirable modes of play. Finally, through battling, the rhetoric of strength is further emphasized, as
Pokémon GO justifies its own existence by persuading players to adopt becoming stronger as a playstyle.

Players can complete research objectives, or small tasks that, upon completion, lead to rewards such as XP, Pokéballs, berries, and even catch encounters within Pokémon. Research objectives vary in difficulty, such as catching a specific kind of Pokémon or just visiting any Pokéstop, and they may be one-off objectives that accumulate toward a limited edition catch encounter, or part of a specific quest line, often leading to a catch encounter with an extremely rare Mythical Pokémon.

Catching new Pokémon to be added to the player’s Pokédex is arguably the prime directive of any Pokémon game: non-player characters talk about how they are working on their own Pokédex and proud of their progress. Catching a Pokémon adds their entry to your Pokédex and gives you more information about them. There are non-player characters that reward you with extremely valuable items for making progress in your Pokédex, like moves that progress the game or items that help catch extremely rare shiny Pokémon (Pokémon that are differently colored than their standard form and have about a 1 in 4096 chance of appearing in mainline games, 1 in 450 in Pokémon GO) (James, 2020b; James, 2020a). Repetitive motions and precise movements work to discipline the player, in the Foucauldian sense (Chess, 2017). This disciplinary process can be an important part of how players become complicit with the game’s ideologies (Chess, 2017). Procedures of consumerism pressure players to catch ‘em all. Each Pokémon has a unique and interesting set of characteristics that set them apart from one another, making catching a diverse number of them a satisfying objective. These consumerist sensibilities align with a feminine form of leisure (Chess, 2017) but are expressed in part as
masculinized core play. Pokémon designer Ken Sugimori has said that Pokémon are
designed the look like they could be your friend (Dr. Lava, 2019). With these designs,
players are encouraged to capture as many Pokémon as possible, and they are justified in
doing so because the designs are appealing, or appropriate.

In line with the genre and fortunately for players on the go, these catch encounters
are short, and it may only take a few swipes with a Pokéball to catch a new friend.
Adding a new entry to the Pokédex is constructed as a reward for succeeding in catch
encounters, but there are additional stakes introduced in Pokémon GO: Pokémon can flee
the encounter after too many failed throws. This adds higher stakes associated with
catching the Pokémon and pressures the player into trying to do a good job on the catch
encounter, so the Pokémon doesn’t run away. When players open a game, they seek
achievement through their own skill and effort (Consalvo, 2009). Pokémon GO creates a
version of gameplay that rewards skill and effort and punishes more half-hearted attempts
to play. Whereas in other mobile games levels may be replayed or new lives may be
bought, in Pokémon GO, not death but failure can be more permanent.

Though catch encounters are not generally required unless players want to collect,
level up, or battle, there is at least one required catch encounter that is required at the
beginning of the game, in which the player chooses between catching one of the three
starter Pokémon from Pokémon Red and Pokémon Blue: Charmander, Squirtle, or
Bulbasaur. A starter Pokémon is the first Pokémon you receive at the start of the game as
a gift from the game’s professor. If the players physically run away from these Pokémon
enough times, a Pikachu will join their roster. This introduces the primary teaching
mechanic of Pokémon GO: following the game’s implicit rules results in rewards and
achievements, while deviations are punished. In this case, the game offers a procedure of choice, and removes the player’s agency when the implicit rule is disregarded.

The second most prominent feature of any Pokémon game is the battle system, and *Pokémon GO* is no exception. In *Pokémon GO*, players are never required to participate in a battle unless they want to earn PokéCoins. However, there are many aspects of the game that indicate battling is an important piece. For instance, Pokémon in *Pokémon GO* have a power level associated with them called Combat Power (CP). This is displayed above their images on their individual entries. Pokémon may also be rated zero- to three-stars based on their hidden attributes. As pictured, their fast attack (for the Pikachu pictured in *Figure 3*, Thunder Shock) and charged attack (for the same Pikachu in *Figure 3*, Thunder Bolt) can only be used inside battles. Through such features, though battles are not required, their presence is centered in a player’s evaluation of their Pokémon and the procedure of strength insists that having a strong Pokémon is something desirable and valuable. In *Pokémon GO* specifically these are only procedures of strength rather than cuteness or prevalence, meaning that a Pokémon’s value is rooted in how strong it is against other hypothetical Pokémon. There is a logic of common sense to the way these
procedures train players to focus on stronger Pokémon, Pokémon that are strong against certain types of Pokémon, and such, but they are not ideologically neutral. While it is not necessarily monetary, their value still comes down to a quantifiable numeric, and the value of your Pokémon can be boiled down to some statistical totals and trade costs. Technically, a strong Pokémon is not necessary for casual play (such as catching a few Pokémon any time the player goes somewhere, and then turning the game off), but this rhetoric of strength is self-preservation, a call to action: to invest in your Pokémon and invest in Pokémon GO.

Note as well in Figure 3 the “Power Up” option accompanied by a stardust and Pokémon candy cost. Selecting this option allows the user to increase the Pokémon’s CP, and the user can also use stardust and Pokémon candies to learn new, better fast attacks and charge attacks. Stardust is earned by in-game actions like completing research tasks and catching Pokémon, and Pokémon candies are earned by catching Pokémon and waking with a buddy Pokémon. As Bogost (2007) argues that schools teach consumerism as part of replicating its ideological processes, and that video games may produce procedural rhetorics to that same end, Pokémon GO commodifies its base procedures reasoning that this is in the interest of growing stronger.

**Familiarity**

As I have previously stated, the Pokémon franchise has become one of the most recognizable media franchises in the world. Pokémon GO’s popularity benefits from this long history. The game builds a sense of familiarity in three ways: through the music, the Pokémon, and the avatars. First, Pokémon GO’s music invites players to adopt the identity of whatever the song calls for at the time and creates an atmosphere of returning
home, even for more unfamiliar players. Second, the Pokémon’s designs encourage
attachment through their variety and cuteness. Finally, the process of designing a player’s
avatar is restricted in a way that suggests players should adopt a fan identity in relation to
Pokémon and *Pokémon GO*.

First, while music is one of the more artistic and narrative elements of a game, it
is also part of the games processes. Players tap on a Pokémon, and an exciting new song
plays; players engage in a battle, and a different, more dramatic song plays. The game’s
procedures associate different songs with different tasks, tasks that the game encourages
players to repeat often. For example, the battle theme for gyms is always the same, and
procedures of strength and consumerism encourage players to return often to gyms to
attain more resources. These battle themes become associated with these situations and
reliably invite players to adopt the identity of whatever the song calls for: the *Pokémon
GO* player, the strong gym battler, the collector.

In addition to adding to the ambience of the games, the music acts as a callback to
other Pokémon games. Some of the main *leitmotifs* of other Pokémon games can be heard
throughout *Pokémon GO*, such as the main Pokémon theme and the theme of one of the
series’ most notorious villain organizations, Team Rocket (or, in *Pokémon GO*, Team GO
Rocket). Any player playing with sound on will find themes like these familiar, either
from extended playtime or from play experiences with other *Pokémon* games. We
approach even new games with a sense of nostalgia because players have already
encountered the games elsewhere, such as in advertisements (Consalvo, 2009). Thus, these sounds come to represent a coming home to the game, a return to the familiar world of Pokémon GO. Similar to the way in which real-life locations are incorporated into the game world, the familiar sounds of Pokémon GO become incorporated into the real world with all of their meanings and significations.

The Pokémon in Pokémon GO are the same recognizable creatures beloved by anyone who is a fan of the franchise. Because of this, players might feel encouraged to catch their favorites and new fans are introduced to their designs. The wide variety of Pokémon designs mean that many different kinds of players have a variety of designs that may appeal to them: players who like cuter designs may be drawn to the mascot Pokémon Pikachu (Figure 3), while players who like more fearsome designs might assign the monstrous “Gyarados” (Figure 4) as their buddy.

In designing their avatar, many players may notice familiar faces and designs in addition to the Pokémon GO originals. For example, pictured in Figure 5, the avatar can
be seen wearing the Team Magma top, a design based on the outfits worn by the antagonistic Team Magma in *Pokémon Ruby, Pokémon Emerald, and Pokémon Omega Ruby.* Players can choose from other familiar options, like a “Gengar” onesie based on the ghostly Pokémon Gengar, or a Team Rocket uniform inspired by one of the characters in the long-running Pokémon anime. Specifically, options like outfits inspired by the protagonists of *Pokémon Fire Red* and *Pokémon Leaf Green,* and *Pokémon Heart Gold* and *Pokémon Soul Silver* encourage a direct association between the player characters of those games and the player of *Pokémon GO,* perhaps even adopting a roleplaying style of play whose absence otherwise differentiates *Pokémon GO* from other *Pokémon* titles. In designing an avatar, players never truly have full autonomy, as it is the game’s designers that decide what kinds of options should be available and what kinds of information an avatar should communicate (Kolko, 1999). In this case, the procedural rhetoric of the avatar’s design argues for an adoption of a fan identity. Avatars are a player’s connection to the game world (Waggoner, 2009) and *Pokémon GO* argues that connection should be one like that between fan and fan object.

In addition to the familiar styles, it is worth noting the constraints *Pokémon GO* places on avatar appearance. There are two avatar styles available, one with a

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1 They also appear in *Pokémon Sapphire* and *Pokémon Alpha Sapphire* but they’re not the main antagonists. I just have to mention this for accuracy’s sake.
traditionally masculine shape with short hair and one with a traditionally feminine shape with a long ponytail. The player has the ability to choose their skin color and hair color from a variety of options, but they cannot choose their hair style or, say, the build of their character. While the player does not have to define their gender as “male” or “female” per se, they do have to assume the identity of a certain image of masculinity or a certain image of femininity. The Pokémon GO player is specifically constrained in how they can express their gender identity.

The same way an audience’s identity is discursively created through a speech, so, too is a nostalgic fan identity procedurally created and ideologically constituted for players of Pokémon GO (Black, 1970; Charland, 1987). Through music that invites the player “home” to Pokémon GO, through Pokémon designs that are familiar to some and created specifically to be appealing to many, and through constraining what kind of player identity can be created in the avatar, Pokémon GO creates a sense of familiarity and even nostalgia by rhetorically constructing an audience that is already a fan of Pokémon GO even upon first opening the app.

Conclusion

Almost every aspect of the mobile game Pokémon GO is constructed in a way that blurs the lines of the game’s world, creating procedures that invite players into the world of Pokémon GO. In this way, Pokémon GO blurs the boundaries of the magic circle, granting passage to the player to traverse between the world of the real and the world of the virtual. Processes in Pokémon GO are implemented in a way that the app is unobtrusive in terms of time and transparent in terms of space. Further, the barrier to entry in Pokémon GO is very low: the game unifies old and new players with familiar
themes while easing the burden of learning more technical gameplay elements like type matchups, resistances, and specific stats.

The game’s processes construct a public that plays together. Where Pokémon GO blurs the boundaries of game-life and real-life rules, it creates an aesthetic of casual play: unassuming, transparent, malleable. However, the game’s procedures simultaneously work under rhetorics of strength, engagement, and core play, legitimating its existence in a masculinized culture of gameplay. Pokémon GO commodifies relationships and gameplay in the interest of strength, and what cannot be achieved can always be purchased in the premium store. In summary, you don’t have to invest in Pokémon GO—but don’t you want what’s best for Pikachu?

In response to my research question, how are value and identity constructed in mobile games, a rhetorical analysis of Pokémon GO demonstrates that the player is invited into an identity that is already created for them through procedural rhetorics of cooperation and familiarity. Likewise, Pokémon and other players are valuable insofar as they can make the players stronger and possessing stronger Pokémon proports to make the game itself more valuable. As a result, I argue game studies scholars must consider the contours of magic circle and how it relates to casual and hardcore play in order to fully understand the identities mobile games rhetorically construct for players and the value that mobiles games argue for.

Having analyzed the rhetoric of Pokémon GO, I now turn to the second half of my study: an analysis of the audiences of mobile games and how they construct value and identity in those games.
Chapter 5

Audience Study

I don’t like the idea of people spending money on mobile games because it’s for me, in my opinion, like, I don’t see anything physical with the money that I spent […] it’s not necessarily something I condone because, like I said, I don’t see anything physically from buying something in a mobile game. I’m spending physical money on a virtual game.

Rosie (29, Female, Hispanic)

This sentiment—that mobile games, virtual objects, are not worth the physical money put into them—is one that came up often during this study. This sentiment is particularly noteworthy because it crystalizes the cultural conversation that inspired this dissertation: that players just do not place value on mobile games the way they place value on other kinds of games. In my rhetorical analysis, I revealed how mobile games justify their own importance by blurring the boundaries of gameplay, fitting easily into players lives like casual play, but strongly urging an attitude toward gameplay that more closely resembles hardcore play. From Rosie’s words, we can see that mobile games might not always measure up in the eyes of players, and the strong arguments made in their own defense can be lost along the way. This complicates my previous findings on value and identity in mobile games.

While textual analysis offers useful insights about how value and identity are constructed in mobile games, without an analysis of the audience, it remains unclear how audiences understand their own identities as players and how they perceive the value of the games they play. Juul (2010) explains that taking only a player-centric or game-
centric approach in video game studies can lead to criticisms such as not taking audience into account, or not playing enough games. Instead, Juul (2010) suggests taking a starting point, “the way games and players interact with, define, and presuppose each other” (p. 9, emphasis original). While the procedural rhetoric of mobile games makes a strong argument in favor of its own value, and while it encourages players to identify with the game, game audiences may conceive of these relationships differently in ways that impact our understanding of how value and identity function in mobile games.

In this chapter I argue that players often construct their mobile games’ value in a way that centers the opinions of others. Players feel their games do have value, but often take a defensive stance when asked to describe that value. They communicate about their games and play in a way that signals fear that their own sense of value might not hold up to scrutiny. Mobile game players must constantly negotiate the perceived clash between their adult identity with the mobile games they play, as mobile games as a whole are considered more childish. This creates a tension between the “real” adult world and the “virtual” mobile game world. Because of the preoccupation with what an adult should be, and whether or not adults should play mobile games, the fan identity proves not as easily adopted in relation to mobile games. Players construct an identity that enjoys a reciprocal relationship with game creators, and they contribute to that relationship through their purchases. The relationships between players are made reciprocal and mobile games gain value when they are able to enhance interpersonal relationships. There is tension specifically between the adult identities players feel they ought to have and the perceived value of mobile
games, which are seen as childish and less material than more adult concerns. Players incorporate mobile gameplay into their other identities such as “student” or “server.” Players may return to a nostalgic identity in their mobile gameplay and their mobile games bring new value to other games they enjoy.

I will begin this chapter by reviewing the literature on casual gaming, mobile gaming, and fan identity. Then, I will discuss how there is a tension that must be negotiated through players’ identity and the perceived value of mobile games in five ways.

**Review of Literature**

**Casual Gaming**

While once upon a time the words “video game” might have called to mind violent shooting games with a negative impact on young boys, this mythos is becoming increasingly drowned out by waves of different, more broadly accessible games. Games that deviate from these stereotypes are becoming increasingly popular and players that look different from the stereotypical gamer identity are being acknowledged and incorporated by video game developers.

Games today have made a move toward casual, characterized by a return to simpler mechanics and a push to fit into players’ daily lives (Juul, 2010). By definition, casual games differ in content and playstyle to the more mainstream understanding of video games. The casual game is easier to play and not as time intensive (Juul, 2010). Casual games tend to punctuate players’ days, filling in the gaps, and are often defined in opposition to the gorier and more graphically intensive core games (Juul, 2010). These
more casual games, like *Solitaire*, once came pre-loaded for free on computers and were consequently disregarded as merely tangential to “real” games (Cote, 2020).

The Nintendo Wii in particular is responsible for bringing casual games to the forefront of the gaming conversation as part of its Blue Ocean strategy (Cote, 2020). Nintendo’s Blue Ocean strategy involved creating a new market for Nintendo games, avoiding competition with other game companies (Cote, 2020). By expanding their target audience beyond just hardcore gamers, Nintendo tapped into a market of more casual players, bringing attention to such games and such playstyles that were overlooked in the past.

Along with the descriptors of casual play come stereotypes. The stereotypes surrounding casual play may point toward the belief that casual games are not as ubiquitous as core games as they are not as often made the central focus of gaming discussions, but this is not the case. Chess (2018) explains, “hardcore gaming may rule the universe of video games: it defines big budgets, trends, and conversations. However, we live in a casual world” (p. 61). While perhaps the biggest, most graphically impressive, and most expensive games are perceived as hardcore, casual games are everywhere—they often live on phones, travel widely with users, and provide moments of play periodically throughout players’ days.

However, despite stereotypes, players of casual games are not necessarily looking for easy or unsophisticated games (Keogh, 2017). Even in the face of such a distinction, casual gamers may be just as invested in their games as core gamers, or even more so.

The idea that only certain, more hardcore players play games developed in the 1970s-1980s alongside the stereotype that games and technology were for boys (Juul,
2010). The core game, the centerpiece of gaming, is technologically sophisticated, time intensive, and may be bloodier in content (Juul, 2010). Core games are thought to be about, “hard work and skill, which tap into dominant cultural notions like meritocracy and the protestant work ethic,” and they are understood in opposition to a more feminine playstyle (Chess and Paul, 2019, p 109-110; Chess, 2017). Core games by definition should be more difficult and require more investment to complete.

Core gamers play because they want to achieve game completion and rank high on the leaderboards (Juul, 2010). Because they are so centered in conversations about gaming, core gamers earn more access to gaming capital by sharing their skills and knowledge with other gamers (Consalvo, 2009). Gaming capital allows players to flex their knowledge and skill to gain status. Additionally, the gamer identity is further complicated as Chang, Constantino, and Soderman (2017) suggest that an increase in games featuring permadeath (a death mechanic in video games that permanently ends the player’s run) could be related to the “death” of the gamer identity. It should be noted, however, that these characteristics are just as much stereotypes as they are descriptions.

When it comes to distinguishing hardcore and causal games, the line is artificial and fuzzy. These categories were created in the 1990s as descriptors that, even then, did not always hold up; today, they take on a life of their own (Chess and Paul, 2019). Despite this, exploring the dichotomy of these labels is a helpful exercise in bringing to light often overlooked causal games and casual play styles and understanding why some players make these distinctions in the first place.

In addition to the stereotypes about causal and core players, stereotypes about how players play is also often gendered. For many game developers, play for women
should be “productive, filling holes in time, or functioning as a backdrop to emotional labor” (Chess, 2017, p. ix). This type of play is consequently understood as frivolous by developers and core gamers alike (Chess, 2017 p. ix). The stereotypes of casual versus core gaming map onto stereotypes of gender identity in which core gamers contend with masculinized conceptions of hard work and high stakes in their gaming. However, these stereotypes are not based on players’ realities (Kagan, 2018; Chang et al., 2017; Chess, 2018). Gamer identity is complicated and messy and game taste does not neatly follow gendered lines (Klevjer and Holden, 2017).

Even the fiction of the casual gamer versus the hardcore gamer fails to hold up to scrutiny. Arguing against the contentious and often gendered politics of who is allowed to call themselves a gamer, Juul (2010) notes that it is the “pull,” the desire to play a game, that makes a player a gamer. Rather, other factors such as interest in Nintendo or E-sports are better predictors of taste in games (Klevjer and Hovden, 2017). For example, a player who plays more casually might find more enjoyment in a Nintendo game like Animal Crossing that easily fits into a player’s schedule, not necessarily because Nintendo games are all casual but because they publish more games that suit this playstyle.

For example, one place where playstyle is not so easily defined can be found in Massively Multiplayer Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). MMORPGs are often considered hardcore games, and players put hours upon hours into creating their characters and leveling up. Some groups of players, however, form guilds that emphasize playing together and hanging out with one another, an objective that results in more positive feelings related to play (Snodgrass, Batchelder, Eisenhauer, Howard, Dengah, Thompson, and Bassarear, 2017). Players are inclined to play games the way they want
and not necessarily in any prescribed way (Snodgrass et al., 2017). Not only is it possible to play different kinds of games in different ways but doing so can be entertaining and rewarding for players.

Players of all kinds navigate a liminal space between fan and casual audience. The most hardcore players may be very familiar with game mechanics and speed-running strategies but otherwise not identify as a fan of the series they play. The most casual of players may only put in a few handfuls of minutes of play at a time but consider themselves very invested in the universe of their game. In the next section, I will discuss fandom and fan identity, shedding more light on this topic.

**Fandom Studies**

Many players, whether they consider themselves core or casual players, or whether those distinctions are even necessary, could be considered fans of the games they play. Being an abbreviation of “fanatic,” historical characterizations of fans have been unkind, usually depicting fans as women overly invested in a certain subject, like the theatre or a particular movie (Jenkins, 2013). Jenkins (2013) gives the example of “Matinee Girls,” women who went to the theatre just to see the actors, or so men at the time criticized. A more recent example might bring to mind *Twilight* fans, who were demonized for their enjoyment of the series, and *Twilight* Moms in particular—older fans of *Twilight*—who were considered “creepy” (Hills, 2016, p. 121).

More recently, the idea of a “fan” in academia has moved away from the pathologized fanaticism that it once held and toward an appreciation for fans’ role in cultural industries (Sandvoss, Gray, & Harrington, 2017). Along with this turn came the more subjective approach to fan studies in which the researcher discloses their own close
connection to the fan object or fan community, a move already long adopted as an approach to cultural studies at large (Jenkins and Scott, 2013). Further, fan studies takes great inspiration from feminist and queer theory by adopting this subjective standpoint and acknowledging affective investments (Jenkins and Scott, 2013). Scholars will reveal their fan identity in their research and their connections to the community of fans they are studying. Jenkins (2013) goes so far as to suggest that academics doing fan research should necessarily be fans themselves in order to bridge the interpretive gap between academia and fan communities.

With social media, fans increasingly have the ability to represent themselves (Sandvoss et al., 2017). Sandvoss et al. (2017) references a documentary about fans of the band One Direction which painted fans of the band in a negative light and contrasted this with fans’ own reaction to the documentary, whose negative response to the documentary was much stronger than expected and much more humanizing. Although fans still face some ire for their involvement in fandom, their participation has been more recognized than it has in the past. For better or for worse, fans in the age of the Internet are a public collective.

Meaning making is a core feature of fan participation. Jenkins (2017) explains that meaning making is a social experience, and so fan membership is part of a subculture. Jenkins (2017, p. 23) draws from de Certeau’s (1984) concept of poaching. In describing the habits of readers, de Certeau describes poaching as an act of reading which resists cultural hierarchies by appropriating the content for their own purposes (de Certeau, 1984). Jenkins (2017) expands on this definition and says, “poaching, to me, captured that process of negotiating over the meaning of text, and the terms of their
relations with producers” (p. xxi). Jenkins adapts this to fans to explain the way they, “construct their social and cultural identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images” (p. 23). For fans, consuming media content is not a passive affair, and it plays an important role in how they construct their identities as fans.

Different fan groups may construct different kinds of fan identity, even within the same media fandom (Miller, 2017). Disciplinary fandoms, for instance, are seen as working toward the economic success of media objects by moderating their own and other fans’ consumption, while participatory fandoms position themselves on equal footing in a shared fandom with the creators of their favorite media objects (Miller, 2017). Other factors such as gender, age and socioeconomic status play a role in the way fans perform their fan identity (Humphries and Kucek, 2020). For example, fans who watch sports games at pubs considered themselves “true” fans even though attending live games was not always financially viable for them (Humphries and Kucek, 2020). The fans’ socioeconomic status impacted the way they could perform their fan identity, but the fans did not consider their identity compromised because they could not afford to go to the games, even though it’s possible other fans might not have considered them “true” fans because they could not go to the games. Just as Jenkins (2013) explains, these fans are active viewers of their fan objects, and the community of other soccer fans is important to their fan identity. Different constructions of fan identity and different rules of engagement can shape how fans interact with their preferred fan objects, content creators, and other fans.

However, while the general impetus in fan studies is to research fans’ active engagement with media texts and their cultural production as a result, there are dark sides
to fandom that should not be overlooked. Online sports fandom offers a digital space for fans to share ideologies of Black destruction (Johnson, 2020). Black fans of various forms of media such as Tyler Perry movies or ballet dancer Misty Copeland feel obligated to consume media of Black individuals, especially in white spaces, even when they don’t enjoy the content (Martin, 2019). Martin (2019) suggests one remedy for the focus on white fandom practices and their transferability to nonwhite fandom (but not the reverse) may be researching the visibility politics of fandom. Again, dominant and hegemonic readings are replicated in fandoms, and this is also true of fan studies.

Fan studies is the enduring legacy of audience studies writ large, but the focus is on fans in particular (Gray, 2017). Fan studies understands fans as active participants in the media they consume, describing this participation as “fan culture.” Jenkins (2013) outlines five dimensions of fan culture: “relationship to a particular mode of reception, its role in encouraging viewer activism, its function as an interpretive community, its particular traditions of cultural production, [and] its status as an alternative social community” (p. 1-2). In this section, I discuss each of these in turn.

First, fans begin the meaning-making process at the moment of reception and then debate those meanings with other fans (Jenkins, 2013). Consuming their media is fans’ entry point into participation, not the entirety of their media experience. The fan identity is adopted across a wide array of fandoms. Soccer fans in Australia use shared songs to construct a local identity that ties to their favorite sports team (Collinson, 2009). eSports fans—fans of electronic sports, or competitive video games—sought out content in ways that mirrored traditional sports fans (Brown, Billings, Murphy, and Puesan, 2017). While eSports fans are often dismissed as less serious than sports fans, they are often avid
consumers who participate in their fandoms in ways that are similar to other fans, even though they do not necessarily consume content related to traditional sports (Brown et al., 2017). Even though gamers get a lot of attention from game studies, game fans should not be dismissed. Most research on video game players in particular has focused on gamers (a separate identity from video game fans) and game players, but not necessarily video game fans or video game fandom (Swalwell, Stuckey, and Ndalianis, 2017).

Second, there are certain practices of criticism that are associated with fandom that fans learn (Jenkins, 2013). The media text is origin point of fandom, and fan interpretation is an important part of media fandom. Fanfiction is one example of fan productivity that has value for its audience within a specific fan context (Busse, 2017). Fanfiction is social and intertextual, but it is still created, disseminated, and received like other literary works, just for particular fan audiences (Busse, 2017). Busse (2017) analyzes a work of fan fiction that was nominated for an award and had its merits questioned because it does not suit the literary model of an award-winning work. Effectively, removed from the context of a fan audience, the fan fiction was seen as an anomaly. Fans interpret other media works through their fan fiction, creating new realities and possibilities that can be appreciated by other fans.

Third, fans talk back to media producers and assert their desires and cultural preferences, even though media producers do not necessarily view fan opinions as representative of the viewing audience (Jenkins, 2013). In spite of their relative powerlessness, part of participating in fandom is the act of talking back to producers. Social media, for example, plays a big role in Lady Gaga fans having a connection to Lady Gaga herself (Click, Lee, and Holladay, 2013).
study, Gaga’s fans felt they enjoyed a reciprocal relationship with Lady Gaga, and fans explained that they thought she was popular precisely because she used social media (Click et al., 2013). Social media in particular facilitates the talking back that fans partake in, bringing them closer to their fan objects. This aspect of fandom is not necessarily related to how fans organize together, but the fact that they come together as a community.

Fourth, fandoms have their own aesthetic traditions and practices that repurpose the source material (Jenkins, 2013). Fans incorporate already existing media texts and characters into their own creations. In their participation, fans participate in the meaning-making that was once thought to be solely the producer’s power. For example, Black fans of the TV show Scandal come together in online communities to discuss their fan object and elevate the pleasures of women of color (Warner, 2018). These communities form safe fandom spaces for Black women to express their love of Scandal (Warner, 2018). Part of being a fan is being a part of fandom, a special space where fans can safely explore the contours of media they love.

Finally, fandom is a social community, one with its own cultural traditions (Jenkins, 2013). Fandom brings together like-minded media audiences on the basis of media texts they love. Some fan activities can take the form of media rituals which recreate dominant/hegemonic readings of fan objects (Booth, 2015) For instance, fans may center texts as the most important, and evaluations of the text as events which reinforce fan practices and meaning in fan audiences (Booth, 2015). So, when fans engage in media criticism, this practice is part of the way fans express their fandom. For example, list-making in fan communities—such as a “Top 10 Mobile Games” or
“Favorite Adventure Games” list—reifies media as the everyday norm, and these evaluations of media texts emphasize feelings that their media is universal (Booth, 2015). In this way, fan practices feel common sense and often work to justify themselves.

Fans interaction with media is varied from media object to media object, from fan community to fan community, and from fan to fan. Fans may reconstruct dominant hegemonies in their fan practices, and this can result in pushing out fans that do not fit the white, female stereotype associated with media fandom (Jenkins, 2013). However, it is possible that video game fandom looks different, reconstructing hierarchies that exist in the larger gaming community.

**Analysis**

For this project, I interviewed 30 self-identified mobile game players on the topic of value and identity in mobile gaming. In these interviews, I found that mobile games positioned players so that their fan identities were in constant negotiation, changing their relationship to the world through their mobile gameplay. In the previous chapter, I argued that mobile games blur the boundaries between the game world and real world through a rhetoric of strength that persuades players to participate in its gameplay. By looking at their relationship to the game creators, relationship to other players, the materiality of the games, time, and familiarity, I will demonstrate how this negotiation works and the bearing of that force on the magic circle.

**Relationship to creators**

In their interviews, players expressed a heightened feeling of connection to the creators of the games they enjoyed playing. Jenkins (2013) uses the term “participatory culture” to describe the complex interrelationship between fans and creators, especially as
more media creators have courted fans through engagement. Mobile game players were very attuned to this relationship and sought engagement through their purchases. Through this connection, players voiced a desire to support creators of games they liked, moderate support of larger game makers, and disdain for creators perceived as less savory.

Many players expressed that they wished to spend money on mobile games because they wanted to support the creators. Terra (24, Female, Ashkenazi Jew) explained, “I feel like game developers and artists and all kinds of people who make products for games or other media, they do deserve to get paid and that has to come from somewhere. It’s work like any other work, even more luxurious than regular work, so it should be paid properly.” Even though participants expressed that the labor of game making was a very fanciful line of work, participants saw that game developers and artists should be paid fairly. For many, the labor of creating the game was enough to justify fair payment for the creators. Anna (21, Female, White) expressed a certain duty to support the creators in exchange for the time spent playing the game. She noted, “I figured I had already spent so much time playing the game I owed it to the developers to, like, drop a couple bucks on it.” Through their play, an unstated contract is formed between player and creator, one in which the creator puts out work for the player to enjoy, and if the player does enjoy it, they express their gratitude through financial support. Players adopt a responsibility toward the creators when they enjoy a mobile game, demonstrating a reciprocal relationship between player and creator.

For some participants, it was especially important that creators be paid fairly when the game was one they particularly enjoyed. Bruno (28, Male, White) said, “personally, I think if a developer created this great video game and I love it so much
then I'm going to give him money […] if I want to show my appreciation for the video
game, I'm going to leave a review for the said video game and I'm going to contribute my
money towards them.” A game that the player enjoys is a game that is perceived as
valuable, and so it is worth it for players to contribute financially to support these games.
Still, their willingness to pay is based on their investment in the game, which is a key
building block of fan identity (Jenkins, 2013), even if players don’t identify outright as
fans.

Not only did participants feel creators were deserving of their money, but some
were willing to support the creators in other ways. Players would review the game so that
other players might also download it and some players also felt that they might support
their favorite creators through watching ads. For example, Iris (29, Female, White/Latina)
said, “Candy Crush… I'll play the ads on there all the time 'cause they aren't too intrusive
and I don't spend any money so I'm like, this is reasonably fair. I want game developers
to get paid.” Even though advertisements were frequently rated as an aspect of mobile
game design that players did not enjoy and even found prohibitive, players are willing to
engage with them for the sake of the developers getting paid if they liked the game, even
at the cost of their own enjoyment. This ethos of effort is associated with masculine
stereotypes of core play but can be seen here as part of “casual” gameplay. The value
associated with supporting creators outweighs and justifies the discomfort of sitting
through advertisements.

Some players felt incentive to support local developers in particular, especially
ones they felt sympathy toward. Iris said, “the main one that I’ve spent money on before
is that Happy Street one, and part of it was because the developers, I learned, were from
Redondo Beach. And I was like ‘it’s expensive to live there. Let me give you two, three dollars every once in a while, when I can.” The average home price in Redondo Beach, California, is $1.1 million dollars, and the participants saw spending money on the game as a way to assuage the high cost of living (Zillow, 2020). Iris’s comment also illustrates a feeling of immediacy in the face of developers and games that were geographically close to them. Perhaps because the places we live and the communities we are part of are necessarily part of our identity, players found more value in paying for these sorts of games as a way of reinforcing those aspects of their identity and building a sense of community mediated by the game.

Despite their desire to express support for the most part, players also hold the creators to a certain ethical standard, especially because creators make money from their games. For instance, players were disdainful toward creators who “forced” players to spend money, or who were perceived as too pushy, especially regarding “pay-to-play” content. Red (31, Non-Binary, White) said, “if it has a pay-to-play element where you hit a paywall where they want you to invest real world money into unlocking these further things or you can’t solve this level without putting in money, rather than effort, those sorts of things make me back away from a game.” Players thought they should be able to progress through the game without hitting any paywalls or without needing the assistance of extra items that cost money. This amounts to an exchange of effort for progression, rather than paying to progress, a playstyle that maps on to hardcore stereotypes of gaming (Chess and Paul, 2018).

Likewise, commercial mechanisms in a game’s design have the potential to affect players’ enjoyment and immersion in games (Lin and Sun, 2007). This could possibly be
because in retrogaming communities especially, players may feel the games they enjoy are being exploited (Heineman, 2014). Players are willing to support creators, but they do not want to do so at the cost of their own immersion in the games they wish to support. Even though the mobile game players I interviewed did not necessarily identify as fans, their participatory engagement with creators modeled fan behaviors (Jenkins, 2013). Fans are active consumers of media and though they are often dismissed by the industry, they do engage directly with creators (Jenkins, 2013). In mobile gaming, this is complicated by the fact that players don’t want to be forced to participate in a way that compromises their autonomy as players.

Likewise, players were wary of creators bound to controversy, and wouldn’t consider even playing their games. If a creator was involved in a scandal, for instance, players would often think twice about paying for those games, and even playing those games at all. Kara (25, Female, Middle Eastern) explained, “I […] immediately thought I wouldn't be interested in checking it out if there's any controversy going on with it, you know, somebody who made it or is involved in it is, like, not great.” Kara would not be interested in even playing a game if she had heard any controversy surrounding the game. This is possibly due to the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the player’s identity and their identity in relation to the creator. However, players still felt empowered enough to distance their own identities as players as separate from the creator when necessary. Author J.K. Rowling’s recent infamy for speaking out against trans women played a role in players’ ability to enjoy games taking place in the *Harry Potter* universe, even games that Rowling had no hand in making. Iris said, “with all the recent, like, stupid stuff that J.K. Rowling has been saying it's just like, I don’t wanna have even-- me
watching an ad on there feels like she's gonna get paid by it so that made it really uncomfortable as well just, like, her politics. Even though I know she had nothing to do with the creation of this game, I just worry that because it's, you know, her brand and stuff [that] she'll get some money out of it.” Especially in the case of nostalgic games, players are quick to hold creators accountable for content they find distasteful.

Sometimes this involves external controversy, as in J.K. Rowling’s transphobic tweets. Otherwise, it involves inadequate representation within the game (Heineman, 2014). Players tie creators closely to their content and find their ability to connect with a game compromised when creators behave badly. The possibilities for this scenario are heightened by virtual spaces like social media that amplify fans’ identification with fan objects and encourage the reciprocal relationship they imagine with creators (Click et al., 2013). Players see their games as closely tied to their creators and do not want to construct their player identity in relation to a creator whose values may be odds with their desired identity.

It hardly needs to be stated that, in reality, one player does not single-handedly support any single creator, but fans are explicitly defined by their contributions to cultural industries whether in creating art pieces or talking back directly to creators. Fans experience a relationship with cultural industries with a great deal of reciprocity (Jenkins, 2013). The way mobile games mediate the relationship between creator and player and the way players form their identity as both autonomous and benevolent, there is a greater sense of immediacy created, one in which players are empowered, through additional labor and through their purchases, to support a creator. This, in turn, allows fans to
leverage the value they create through reviews or effort to establish their own identities as players.

**Relationship to other players**

Just as the relationship between players and creators becomes understood as more immediate and reciprocal through mobile game play, the interrelationship between players becomes more immediate as well, but also specifically understood through the terms of the mobile game. Specifically, players enjoyed playing with others both virtually and in person, but mobile games also created tension when they were seen as a distraction from interpersonal relationships.

Like other games, from board games to console games, mobile games can consist of both competitive and cooperative gameplay elements. Of playing with distant friends, Bruno said, “it's the notion of ‘I'm playing this game with my buddy.’ Now, that buddy may be four states over, someone I have never talked to. Well, let me rephrase that—someone that I seen, you know, years passed, and a pop-up game. He's playing. I'll play with them.” Players can connect with new friends and distant friends to play together, the game mediating and even initiating the interaction. Some players have played with the same people for years, virtual strangers, and consider themselves to have a relationship with those players, one established through the game. Rosie said games do not necessarily have to be competitive to feel like they are being played together, and that, “I can be playing it sitting side-by-side even though we're not competing against each other or, like, racing against each other, or fighting against each other, whatever, in the game, like, we can still both be playing it and kind of show each other what we're doing.” The players may play together without playing together, occupying the same space with their
games and with one another. According to Jenkins (2015), one aspect of participatory culture is a social connection with one another. Through their mobile games, players were able to create value from gaining that social connection to one another.

Certain games in particular were well-suited to facilitating real-world play, such as the location-based Pokémon GO and Ellen DeGeneres’ Heads Up. Of Pokémon GO, Juniper (29, Female, Hispanic) said, “now that they've introduced the Pokémon trainer battles I can play with, like, my brother who also has Pokémon GO and train against him and be able to level up my Pokémon.” Playing with other players was an added benefit for this player, as they were able to play with their brother, which demonstrates the value of the games in terms of real-world relationship building. Older players often feel connected to younger family members through gameplay (Quandt et al., 2008). A mobile game like Pokémon GO has value when it enhances interpersonal relationships, when it has something to add to the way players live their everyday lives. Ash (40, White, Female) said, “I have a six-year-old right who is also very into it. So, it's like something we all do together and we go meet friends and we'll walk around and get our miles in and it's interactive. We're interacting with each other. We're getting exercise and we're laughing at silly Pokémon and we're renaming the ones we give to each other funny names, you know, there's like inside jokes.” Playing together offers a way for older players and younger players to connect through game activity and inside jokes. Playing together connects players through gameplay, but also outside the bounds of the game. Inside jokes like Ash’s, then, are carried outside of the media they share.

On the other hand, the biggest faux pas in mobile gaming, as described by players, was to engage with play in a way that distracted from relationships. Ash
explained, “you're not giving someone your full attention if you're engaged in any other activity. It could be the same with like if I'm looking at social media when I should be actively engaged with something else. So, it feels like it's not—it feels like it's not appropriate. It's not giving someone what they need or what they are asking of you. You're distracted, if that makes sense.” Ash felt that mobile games would distract from interpersonal relationships if she played them around other people. Like any other activity, it is a disservice to interpersonal relationships to be distracted, to not fully invest your attention in the other person. Mobile games occupy too much time and space when they are used conspicuously around others, and mobile games ideally should be transparent. They should fit neatly into the gaps in a person’s day without demanding attention (Juul, 2010).

**Mobile game materiality**

While relationships were abstracted through mobile games, the mobile games themselves were also constructed in abstract terms. This means that mobile games were understood as unreal in contrast to real things like money, mobile games materiality was contested by players, and mobile games had to be compared to console games as a referent. Many players felt like paying for mobile games was paying for nothing, and were dissatisfied that after purchase, they did not receive a physical object like a game disc. This is an articulation of value and identity that encourages players to push away from their player identities and more fannish investments and become self-conscious about their enjoyment of mobile games. Whereas fans have traditionally been judged by those outside their fandom, this pattern encourages fans to judge themselves and temper their enthusiasm for their fan object.
Paying for mobile games effectively felt to players as if they were paying real money for something that was not real. When paying to play was framed as helping creators that created games they liked, players were willing to make a contribution. However, when it came to paying just to play the game as a game, players were more reluctant to open their wallets to their mobile games. The investments of the player identity are tied to the reciprocal aspect of the relationship with the creator, and less strongly to the games themselves. Terra said, “because as fun as a game is, it's not really worth spending real money on for momentary things.” In this case, money is something real, tangible, while games are more transient. Rosie further explained, “because it costs money sometimes, like real adult money, human U.S. currency money that I unfortunately spent on this stupid game.” One of the hurdles in game studies is that gamers are often seen as adolescent boys (Kirkpatrick, 2012), which is characterized as in opposition to more adult things, like real money. For Rosie and other participants who made similar statements, the identity of “adult” is assumed by players who are negotiating their relationship with more “childish” mobile games. Further, because mobile games are overwhelmingly classified as “casual,” they automatically come with an association of childishness. The feminization of games classified as casual has likewise contributed to the perceived frivolousness of such games. Money is specifically seen as a capital that adults have, and is fundamentally incompatible with more childish interests, or at least cannot be invested in childish interests without some degree of trepidation. There is a tension here, then, between identity as a fan-level player of mobile games who want to support creators they care about and the identity of an adult who does not spend money on such things.
Later, Rosie, who had commented that she had spent money on a mobile game before, continued, “I don't like the idea of people spending money on mobile games because it's, for me, in my opinion, like, I don't see anything physical with the money that I spent so [...] it's not necessarily something I condone because like I said I don't see anything physically from buying something in a mobile game. I'm spending my physical money on a virtual game.” For many players, the physicality of console games versus the virtuality of mobile games was too prohibitive, especially in contrast to the “real” money being spent on them. Some explained that this was likely because they had purchased physical copies of games their whole lives, such as Red who said:

It could just be the background of growing up and buying games for console and then the phone coming later, [...] where yeah you pay for console games where you have this physical card that you're putting in and playing the game on and saving your progression rather than something I’m downloading out of thin air and playing on my mobile device that may or may not like lose the data or is easy more easily deleted or lost or something.

In this case, the player was concerned about losing data or progression in the game, something they perceived to be less likely with a physical gaming device. Red articulated game data as something that crystallizes the relationship between player and game and acts as a digital record of the time and energy that is put into the game. To some extent, a game’s data is a numerical measure of how much value a game has provided the player, or how much value the player has extracted from the game. Game
data can also be seen as a measure of active investment, something that is crucial for the development of fan identity and the “physical” proof of the assumed player identity. On a memory card or a hard drive is encapsulated every action a player has taken, every decision they have made, and every item they have collected.

As a result, spending on mobile games often felt akin to gambling, even in games that were not inspired by casino games, for instance. Speaking of a “gacha,” which comes from the toy capsule machines in Japan called *gacha* or *gachapon* and that also describes mobile games which implement a system in which the player spends in-game currency to draw for certain characters and benefits, Kara said, “and there's a story, and it's a gacha, so there's cards that you can get, it's like gambling basically.” Many players emphasized this can feel like gambling, especially when spending real-world money on such games. Calem (28, Male, White) said, “I'm not trying to sit here and play the slots on my phone, like, I'm 28, I can go to casino if I want to.” Even as gambling spaces, mobile games were seen as inferior to “real life” and adult counterparts. Without prompting, Calem used his own age to make his point. Players feel they should choose the more adult casinos given the chance, but they still return to their mobile games, albeit with some shame. Players take on the outside judgement of fans, a judgment that even today still carries negative connotations (Larsen and Zubernis, 2012). There is a tension between value and identity: between the perceived value of mobile games compared to real world counterparts, and between the responsibilities of the adult identity.

In justifying their purchases, many players would compare the value of mobile games to console games. Kara explained, “in terms of *Mystic Messenger* I would tell people all the time it’s worth the 25 dollars to just buy 1000 hourglasses and get through
the whole game ‘cause it’s a really good story so it’s like you know games that you buy on the Switch, you know Animal Crossing was like 60 dollars so it’s actually a lot cheaper in that sense.” In the game Mystic Messenger, players progress through the game in real time, receiving texts and calls from characters as they try to solve a mystery. Hourglasses are the in-game currency that allow players to progress more quickly through the story (such as buying story chapters outright) or by going back and replaying text conversations they missed. Since buying enough of the in-game currency to finish the game is less expensive than a typical console game, Kara thought investing in the game was a good value for that money. Console games serve as a constant point of comparison for mobile game players, who are willing to invest in mobile games but only to the extent that they would a console game. Core games are usually associated with more capital investment, while mobile games are often thought to be free or less expensive (Juul, 2010). The act of investing in a game at all is more associated with more masculinized core play and in opposition to feminized casual play. The divide between perceived causal and core games is also a divide of value, where the perceived value of the mobile games must not exceed that of a console game. Likewise, by comparing mobile games to console games, players demonstrate a measure of their identities as gamers in that they are even able to make such comparisons.

To be clear, the demarcation between “real” money and “unreal” games is a construction. For instance, console games are increasingly moving toward a digital format, with many titles released solely as digital titles. These games are not perceived in the same way mobile games are perceived by players whether because they are usually identified as core games, have recognizable names associated with them, or because they
are digital copies of extant games. In fact, the barrier between “real” money and “unreal”
games in many ways mimics the line of the magic circle. Among my participants, mobile

game players distanced themselves from their mobile games across the barrier of the
magic circle and into the rules of the real world, where they should be more concerned
with adult things. It is possible that this self-consciousness arises because mobile games
out to be casual games, games that players should not construct their identities around
because they have nothing perceived valuable to offer.

**Time-Achievement Investment Ratio**

Research has repeatedly demonstrated (e.g., Chess, 2018; Joshi, 2019; Lin, 2014;
Anderson, 2018) that mobile games interact in different ways with time, especially
because mobile games are designed so that they may be picked up whenever a player has
time, and game related tasks do not take much time investment. For instance, Quinn (51,
Female, White) said, “well, I don't have to play it for very long. It makes a good, as they
say, toilet game. I can play it one level within, you know, one visit to the bathroom, so I
don't have to invest a lot of time all at once but just doing that several times throughout
the day I can progress steadily.” The time investments for mobile games seem small
enough to fit into otherwise insignificant parts of the players’ days. Jacob (27, Male,
White) agreed, noting, “I would be on there for 15, 20, maybe 30 minutes. Then I'd have
to set it down for a period of time. So, it was really good to play at work when I was
waiting tables because I could just, like, pull it out do the little *bim, bam, boom*, put it
away, and then check it back an hour and a half later and I would have some kind of
playability moment for that.” Casual games, like many mobile games, often punctuate
players’ days and occupy small moments of downtime, rather than interrupting their lives (Keogh, 2017). In this way, they are unobtrusive to the player’s time.

Conversely, if a game took up too much time, players were likely to drop that particular title in favor of others. Mobile games must be flexible to allow them to be incorporated into the player’s lives, otherwise they would be rejected. On playing mobile games to use time wisely, Anna said,

I'm really busy at school most of the time. I'm an engineering student. And so, the time that I get off like when I'm not studying or doing homework or any like Club activities, I don't have a lot of it normally so when I do try to spend it- I try to do as much as possible if that makes sense. So being able to watch TV and like get caught up with any shows I'm interested in and like play a fun little Fire Emblem game. Like I really enjoy that this makes it feel like I'm using my time wisely.

Anna uses her Fire Emblem mobile game to make the most of her time as a busy engineering student. In this way, the game was secondary but also integrated into her identity as a student. Mobile games are designed so that players can easily incorporate them into their other identities because they do not demand time outside of their days to make progress or attain achievements.

Even though players did not want to spend too much time with their mobile games, feeling a sense of achievement in that time was important to them. Terra said, “I mean, the reason I wanted to play the game, I did want to feel like I was, I donno, like achieving something, you know sometimes there are missions and quests and so on, but also not to feel like whenever I'm not there I'm going to miss on something.” This player
valued the sense of achievement her mobile games gave her and seems to feel like she would be losing some value if she missed out on those achievements. Mae (23, Non-Binary, Filipino) further elaborated, “there's definitely like a whole, like, factor to finishing off the game and getting that score that brings enjoyment to me.” Even though mobile game play sessions are often short, they still bring a sense of reward and achievement to players, demonstrating that casual game players are not necessarily looking for easier or more superficial games (Keogh, 2017). Rather, an easy way for players to extract value from their games is to feel the achievement associated with completing in-game tasks.

Many players use their mobile games to kill time, especially with so-called “time wasters.” Terra said, “I mean there may have been extremely time-wasting games that I played before and it would have been embarrassing if anyone knew that. There was I think one of my first games on mobile ever was the whole Candy Crush Saga. It used to take hours of my day and I kind of hated it.” Players feel shame when mobile games take up too much of their time, possibly because interest in mobile phone games is trivialized and thus in opposition to an adult’s interests. As a result, they push back from the fan identities they used to discuss the value they received from their games. Anna observed, “I feel about a lot of people these days play at least some sort of time waster game on their phone.” The time waster moniker is not necessarily an internal critique of such mobile games, as many players engage with such games and find enjoyment with them, so long as players can distance their identity from becoming too invested in the time waster game. For players, there seems to be a trade-off between value and time: the more time a mobile game takes, the less value players feel they get from it, which calls back to
the stereotype of the casual game. We are not supposed to invest in casual games, but as we can see from Juul (2010) and Consalvo (2009) that is not actually the case. In the case of my participants, players become self-conscious of fan investment in mobile games.

However, players did not see their time playing mobile games as a waste of time, or at least they saw them as no more of a waste of time than any other activity. One of my interview questions asked participants, “how would you respond if someone tried to say your favorite mobile game was a waste of time?” Claude (22, Non-Binary, Mexican-American) replied, “I mean everyone has their own opinions and that's theirs. They probably have something that I would think is a waste of time like you know if they're into cars or something, I'd be like, ‘oh that's a waste of time. I don't know why you're focusing on that car,’ you know? I would probably, you know, just react like, ‘okay that's your opinion.’” The way other people build identities out of interests that are not universal might be considered silly to some, but they are not without value. Charlie (26, Questioning, Biracial) emphasized,

Like probably they’re watching a TV show and I could say the same shit, right, like it’s a waste of time to watch The Bachelor you know, it’s a waste of time to do all this shit, but it think the purpose is like to waste time, right, to give yourself some reprieve so that you’re not having your little thinky brain turned on twenty-four seven but also if it’s, like, while it does, sure, in the most technical sense waste time, if we look at it from a purely capitalistic, ugh, like we must be productive, even with that aside I don't think it’s a waste of time.
The adult identity insists players be concerned with more important things than childish mobile gameplay. For many players, the point of mobile games is to waste time, and that in itself is not perceived as a bad thing. In fact, players find value in the time away from adult responsibilities. There is a sense of player autonomy here as well: when players choose to spend their time on mobile games, they find this to be a valuable use of that time, or at least, no more a waste of time than any other activity. However, if mobile games are too demanding of players’ time, or players cannot achieve anything with that time, some of that value was lost.

Further, Claude and Charlie express some protectiveness over the way they have incorporated their mobile game into their identities. Other fans invest in TV shows or cars and they do not necessarily feel bad about this, so it seems unfair for fan investment in mobile games to be viewed negatively, or as a waste of time. Players draw a line in the sand when it comes to spending too much time on mobile games, but they do not feel this time is a waste. Still, mobile game players feel some shame and self-consciousness about owning any fan investment even though they see similar investments with other kinds of fan objects. In spite of the academic work over the years to rehabilitate the image of fandom, there is still a sense of shame that permeates fan spaces and academic circles (Larsen and Zubernis, 2012). Further, fandom, like casual gaming, is seen as frivolous (Larsen and Zubernis, 2012). Despite this, mobile games are designed in a way that makes it easy for players to incorporate their gaming into their already extant identities without necessarily constructing new fan identities.
Familiarity

When it came to choosing new mobile games to play, most players sought familiar games and franchises as their starting points, such as a Disney game or a Pokémon game. Players were attracted to nostalgic games, but new content was also important to them. Players of retrogames, for example, buy nostalgic games to have a “material connection to a time and place that has passed” (Heineman, 2014, para. 49). Mobile games may bring new value to media franchises players already love. Yet, as mobile games, they must be incorporated into the extant fan identity since players are reluctant to form new fan identities around their mobile games.

Sometimes, it was the style of the game that reminded players of other games they had played. Bruno said, “now reading the text was fun, but you know, it brought back the era of like old school video games where it's just text adventures.” This player was nostalgic for the less technical text adventure games that served as early predecessors to modern games in the 1970s and 1980s, in which players would read story dialogue and input text commands. For players, “consuming products from our past is a way to try and (re)connect, on an emotional and personal level with this ‘better’ time” (Heineman, 2014, para. 51). The nostalgic player is allowed passage into the mind of a nostalgic identity, a better identity, one for which play is fun and, more importantly, deemed acceptable.

For Bruno, the nostalgia was an indicator of quality in a mobile game. He said, “if it's a video game, so say for instance, Knights of the Old Republic was an older console computer game that I loved playing when I was growing up. Now, it's a mobile game. I'm, like, you know what, I could play that on my phone. Yes, I'm going to buy it and having it be seven bucks versus the 40, 50 I paid when the first came out. Yeah, I'm
gonna buy it, you know, it's that nostalgia and stuff, like, that now there is a game that is really well made.” The nostalgia of certain games also played a role in their perceived quality, as players were able to appreciate them more because of the old, childish identity that they are nostalgic for. Since players often see mobile games as childish anyway, games that tap into childhood memories are particularly valuable.

For some players, it was at the intersection of nostalgia and new content that they found the most enjoyment. Terra said,

Also, nostalgia does a lot. Because they refer to probably all the games in the franchise and they even bring a lot of side characters in. So, for example, I really like Final Fantasy VI, it was my first introduction to the series, and suddenly like having those comebacks from all those characters the I really loved that was extremely rewarding, and being able to learn more about them and, I don't know, see them in new designs and such.

Claude supported this idea, adding, “it's really worth playing if you wanted more context behind the lore of Kingdom Hearts.” Nostalgia offers a way for players to re/construct old identities (Heineman, 2014) and incorporate mobile games into existing fandoms. Some degree of the value derived from playing these mobile games came from their position in greater media franchises, allowing players to spend more time in worlds they already loved and have constructed identities and communities around.

In this sense, mobile games keep familiar content new and fresh in a way that is easily accessible to players with the appropriate smart phones to play them. Players enjoyed the nostalgia their mobile games made them feel, feeling connected to past times, places, and identities.
Conclusion

Interviews with participants indicated that mobile games have an abstracting effect in multiple different ways. The players’ relationship to creators, for instance, seem more immediate and reciprocal, and players feel they have a real influence on their favorite creators’ livelihoods. In doing so, players construct an identity around benevolence, and their mobile gameplay can be seen as something real, valuable, and adult. Under this assumption, players’ money isn’t just going to some silly mobile game that doesn’t really exist, it’s going to help a real person in a real place.

However, even though identity is closely linked to gaming, it becomes muddied in this process. The fan identity in particular is unstated from conversations about mobile gaming, but mobile game players did not claim the fan identity outright, even when engaging in more fannish behaviors. I argue that this is a result of mobile games reputation as so-called “casual” games. This distinction does not hold up to scrutiny—“casual” games can be played in time-intensive ways and “hardcore” games can be played leisurely. Furthermore, that mobile games have this particular distinction apart from, for instance, console gaming, raises questions about why there is even a distinction between mobile and console gaming at all when such a distinction is not so noteworthy.

Players are quick dismiss mobile games as not “real” games due to their casual nature, and this may play a role in why they are reluctant to adopt the fan identity. While participants agreed to be interviewed by me, they were careful to construct distance between their adult identities, the expectations that come with those identities, and the perceived childishness of mobile games. This is likely complicated further by the politics of the gamer identity, as even avid players are reluctant to call themselves gamers. Shaw
(2011) explains that many players reject the identity, “because they viewed games as peripheral to mainstream media culture, a guilty pleasure, a juvenile pastime, and as a medium that is inherently unimportant” (p. 39). Video games are often not valued in a way that players can form an identity around, creating barriers to the gamer identity. Further, the video games industry rarely recognizes marginalized individuals as gamers, further creating barriers to the identity (Shaw, 2011).

Likewise, because mobile games are seen as casual, players understand their value to be different compared to comparable console games. Mobile games are only as valuable as their console counterparts, and a distinct line is drawn that prevents them as being seen as more valuable, or even valuable in their own right. Mobile games hold value for their player, but the articulation of that value is complicated by the player’s reluctance to identify in relation to their mobile games.

In addition to the unclaimed identities associated with mobile games, value is also constructed in such a way that it must be justified through seemingly adult motives for play and support. Mobile games are a necessarily inconspicuous media, and when they demand too much, players find a new game to play. Mobile games that showed too many intrusive ads, asked for too much money, and were too controversial, for instance, were games that players would cease playing or refuse to pick up in the first place.

Having discussed the results of both the rhetorical analysis and the reception study portion of this dissertation, my next chapter synthesizes the results of these analyses and answers my research question: how are value and identity constructed in mobile gaming?
Chapter 6

Conclusion

Summary

The purpose of this dissertation has been to answer my central research question: *how are value and identity constructed in mobile games?* From previous research, it is clear that there is a strong link between identity and video games, but mobile games had been previously underexplored in this way. Likewise, mobile games are always tied to an associated value, whether it is in claims that the mobile gaming industry is a 68.5-billion-dollar industry, or that mobile games provide benefits for their players (Kaplan, 2019; Mitchell, 2016). To answer the central question of value and identity, I conducted a rhetorical analysis of a popular mobile game and an audience study of mobile game players. For my rhetorical analysis, I specifically chose the game *Pokémon GO* because participants rated it as their most played mobile game in my questionnaire. I wanted to choose a game that was actually popular with players specifically, rather than a game that a smartphone app store recommended, as those games may be downloaded but not necessarily played. For my audience study, I interviewed self-professed mobile game players about the mobile games they play.

In Chapter 4, my rhetorical analysis, I looked at procedural rhetoric in the mobile game *Pokémon GO*, the game that was mentioned most often in the questionnaire I used to collect participant data for Chapter 5. In my analysis, I found that mobile games may blur the edges of the magic circle through their procedures, but those edges are not destroyed entirely. In doing so, the game encourages players to adopt it into their everyday lives. Likewise, mobile games may adopt an aesthetic of casual play with more
malleable procedures of play, but those procedures themselves argue that the player should take a hardcore approach. Effectively, they may argue that time and effort should be invested in the game, and even may suggest spending money as an alternative. Like other rhetorical artifacts, *Pokémon GO* ideologically constructs a certain kind of audience based on the material constraints of the real world, and this player identity has some economic and geographic mobility and is always already a fan of *Pokémon*.

Through its procedures, *Pokémon GO* centers the relationships between players. It does this by showing that collaboration can lead to strength and that interpersonal relationships between players have value that can be commodified in the search for power within the game. In order to attain completion, cooperation is necessary, and procedures quantify which allies are most valuable in this pursuit. These terms of the game—commodification and strength—are how players must understand their interpersonal relationships to be successful in *Pokémon GO*. They are a major mechanism of the game’s procedures.

The procedures of *Pokémon GO* argue a rhetoric of strength. Strength should always be sought by the player, justifying engagements with the game and making apparent its value to the play and legitimizing its own existence. *Pokémon GO* emphasizes the value in strong Pokémon through their stats and through trading with other players where being strong becomes the strategy. Such procedures argue for a more hardcore style of engagement that is not usually associated with mobile games, but, as *Pokémon GO* demonstrates, is clearly not incompatible with mobile games either.

Seemingly in conflict with these values, in that we might expect more nurturing or casual rhetorics, *Pokémon GO* blurs boundaries between the real world and game world.
The boundary does not cease to exist, but it becomes more unclear where the edges of the game end and the “real world” begins. In doing so, the game maps onto the real world for players, even encouraging players to use real-world rules like weather conditions or locations to play the game. This rhetoric also constructs a certain kind of public for *Pokémon GO*, a cosmopolitan public with a certain amount of economic capital.

Adoption of this identity is necessary for progression.

In addition to the cosmopolitan identity *Pokémon GO* constructs a nostalgic identity for players, asking for identification through its music, Pokémon designs, and avatar choices. Players are invited to return “home” to *Pokémon GO* to embody their fan identity associated with Pokémon. Even when it is a home they have never traversed before, *Pokémon GO* encourages players to step into the fan identity anyway. In short, *Pokémon GO* constructs an audience that is already familiar with *Pokémon GO* and is already a fan of *Pokémon GO*.

In Chapter 5, I presented the results of my audience study, which included the aforementioned questionnaire as well as in-depth interviews with 30 mobile game players. Participants expressed a complicated relationship with the mobile games they play. Specifically, they indicated some behaviors that align with previous literature on fandoms (e.g. Jenkins, 2013), but they also carefully distanced themselves from embodying a fan identity. Mobile games were not perceived as valuable to adults. Mobile game players’ identity thus is in a constant state of negotiation with tension introduced by mobile games’ perceived value.

Players felt a reciprocal relationship with the creators of mobile games they enjoy. However, players also felt responsibility associated with constructing their identities in
tandem with creators’, feeling some obligation to compensate creators for their work in making games and likewise distancing themselves from creators whom they would not want their player identity associated with. Even though advertisements were seen as undesirable in mobile games, players expressed that they wouldn’t mind engaging with advertisements and performing the labor of writing app store reviews if it meant creators would be compensated fairly. Thus, players were active in their relationship with creators, modeling behaviors consistent with fan identities. Players felt empowered to leverage the value they created through their own labor to support creators.

In addition to a more reciprocal relationship with creators, players also enjoyed a heightened sense of immediacy with other players. Again, this models a fan identity, as one attribute of fandom is that it is an alternative social community (Jenkins, 2013). Especially when playing with younger family members, players used their mobile games as a way to connect to others. However, it was still seen as a faux pax to play mobile games at the expense of real-life interpersonal relationships. They clearly articulated the idea that mobile games should facilitate real-world interpersonal relationships, not encourage antisocial behaviors.

Relationships were understood through their mobile games, and value was also mediated in this way. When faced with constructing an identity around their favorite mobile games, players found it difficult to negotiate an identity in a way that encompassed their responsibilities to the adult “real” world and the “childish” game world. Players constructed mobile games’ value in a way that was incompatible with money in the real world—there was a shame associated with spending money on mobile games when in exchange they would receive something virtual, which they interpreted as
unreal. Because mobile games do not possess the same materiality as other kinds of games, their value was complicated. Playing mobile games was incompatible with their extant adult identities, so players struggled to connect to mobile games’ value.

Importantly, players were able to incorporate mobile games into their already existing identities, such as “server” or “student.” This was emphasized in the way players were able to achieve small goals in their mobile games in a small amount of time, punctuating their days. On the other hand, mobile games that demanded too much time were seen as undesirable and dropped. While players recognized that fan investments are normal and happen in other areas like in the case of car enthusiasts or movie buffs, players were protective of their mobile games but still reluctant to adopt a fan identity. Rather than constructing a fan identity around their interests like other fans might, mobile game players incorporated mobile games into their identities.

Players did feel a connection to their mobile games, but it was complicated by adult responsibilities, the perceived childishness of gameplay, and the casual association of mobile games. Nostalgia especially played a role in their enjoyment for some players, with mobile games players connecting to a nostalgic identity associated with childhood, a time in which play is fun and acceptable. Mobile games offered a way for players to reconnect in the form of new content, and players found games that offered these opportunities to be valuable additions to series they already enjoyed.

**Constructions of Identity and Value**

Identity and value are central components to how communication scholars should understand mobile gaming. Mobile games construct identities for players to assume and players must in turn negotiate the proffered identity. Likewise, mobile games have a
predetermined value assigned to them and thus must express value in ways that translate for players.

Broadly, video games struggle to express value because they are associated with certain kinds of players and certain styles of play. These do not, however, actually describe players’ realities. Mobile games in particular are devalued because they are associated with casual play. These kinds of games are understood in opposition to core games, which are more centralized and taken more “seriously” than casual games, which are often derisively considered to be mere entertainment. Mobile games must communicate value to players in order to persuade them to play. By associating their gameplay with a core mode of play, for instance, mobile games seek to be perceived as more valuable. There is still a disconnect, though, between how players perceive this value, as they come into mobile gameplay with preconceived notions about mobile games’ value, and how these games should be engaged with. As such, players articulate, mobile games are not worth what they cost. They are, however, still worth playing.

Further, identity has a strong relationship to how we understand the culture around video games. Gaming is associated with a certain identity position that describes some players and marginalizes others. Casual gaming in particular has become increasingly feminized, associated with an identity that might not describe the player. In particular, *Pokémon GO* constructs an identity for its player, one with a certain level of mobility and investment in the game. Players of *Pokémon GO* are pre-constituted as fans and the procedures of the game reinforce this construction. Mobile game players, however, push back against a fan identity, because such investments are incompatible with their other identities. In spite of this, or even because of this, mobile game players
incorporate mobile games into existing identities. Their identity then isn’t “fan” or even “mobile game player,” but someone who plays mobile games. This is important from a feminist game studies perspective as it illustrates agency in players constructing their own identities.

However, this research also complicates the relationship between value, identity, and mobile games. Mobile games are largely classified as casual games, but casual games can be played more intensively, reflecting core play. Previous research has noted that the categories “core” and “casual” are too rigid and formal to truly describe how players play games (Chess and Paul, 2018). However, even in introducing nuance to these labels, certain stereotypes may already be assumed about mobile games that extend beyond descriptive into judgement. Effectively, by relying on these labels alone, mobile games’ value is already pre-constructed, and, likewise, the identities of the players who play such mobile games are also pre-constituted. When core can be used to describe the procedural rhetorics of mobile games, but players still struggle to connect their identities to such games, the relationship between perceived value and identity is brought to the forefront. Players construct their identities not only around the games they play, but also around how those games are perceived—player identity does not exist in a vacuum, and it is directly impacted by perceived value.

Mobile games operate under the assumption that invested player identities will see the value in their games. Fan identity in mobile game players is messy and evades designation as casual or core play. The malleability of a mobile game such as Pokémon GO allows for casual play, but its rhetorics argue for core play. On the surface, this is a logical connection: a more invested player might be more likely to spend money on their
game, and perhaps they might be more likely to tell others about their game. However, my audience study shows that fan investment in mobile games is more complicated than it appears on the surface. Mobile game players are willing to engage in more core modes of play to support a game, but ultimately must distance themselves and justify such decisions in a way that is not necessarily typical of other games, hobbies, or interests. Mobile game players engage in fannish behaviors but do not, ultimately, assume the fan identity. There is a disconnect between the identity that is created by the mobile games and the players’ willingness to adopt that identity, and this extends to a disconnected construction of value.

Because mobile games are not perceived as valuable compared to other more adult interests by players, their associated identities must be rejected. Mobile games like Pokémon GO justify their own value in constructing a player identity that would see the value in strong Pokémon, in collection, in core engagement. But detractors of mobile games cannot engage with this rhetoric in the same way players can without first playing the game. Mobile game players, too, grapple with this rhetoric. So, if value is always constructed by the player, and the player is reluctant to identify with their mobile games, it is difficult to communicate mobile games’ value to others and even to the general area of game studies.

This study was guided by the question, how are identity and value constructed in mobile games? These two concepts overlap where player identity is clearly a key component to mobile gameplay. Mobile games construct identities for players, and players adopt their mobile games into extant identities. Mobile games argue for their own value through rhetorics of core play, and players use these mechanisms to construct their
own value. However, there are also some places of divergence. Identity is an important component of mobile game play, but players struggle to negotiate a player identity around their other perceived responsibilities. Further, despite their core arguments, mobile games are still just not perceived as having real world value, even compared to other games. This further complicates the distancing between players’ identities and their mobile games.

Limitations

As with any research project, there are some limitations to this study. First, because I was not specifically looking for, say, gender and the role gender plays on the construction of value in mobile games, I did not choose to study a mobile game that signifies to the player that it is one of those games “for women.” Chess’ (2017) does this work on designed identity. To contribute to that particular research agenda, I might have asked more questions specifically about those kinds of games. One example might be Candy Crush, which came up in almost every interview I conducted as an example of a game players wanted to distance their player identities from. My interview questions were targeted specially to encourage participants to talk about value, and more questions could have been specifically targeted to encourage participants to talk about identity, whether fan identity, gender identity, and so on. While I didn’t ask about identities specifically, participants shared things that indicated them. Yet, by not asking, I didn’t find particular things about race or gender, for example, that might have been interesting.

I chose to focus on one particular aspect of value that emerged from my review of literature, and this was cost. My interviews ran from about 30 to 40 minutes, so to keep from taking up too much time I had to limit my questions. However, other questions
about different kinds of value could have created a more robust understanding of value. A player might not be willing to spend money one Pokémon GO, but perhaps they would argue that the extra exercise they get from playing it has value. So, for example, I could have gotten additional results by asking more targeted questions about how participants understand value and subsequently how that relates to mobile games.

For my rhetorical analysis, I only looked at one example mobile game since I was looking for an exemplar. I restricted myself by choosing the mobile game which received the most votes in my questionnaire, Pokémon GO, and this could also possibly present some limitations. On one hand, I am personally a fan of the Pokémon franchise and specifically a fan of Pokémon GO, and there are some advantages to understanding the diegesis of the game I studied. On the other hand, analyzing a game I was not familiar with might have allowed me to interrogate it from an outside perspective, possibly yielding different results. Still, within cultural studies it is normative for academics who are fans (often called “acafans”) to study their fan objects, so this is not beyond the realm of accepted research methodology.

Further, as an Augmented Reality game, Pokémon GO falls into possibly a more niche category of mobile game. It is not that people do not play AR games, and in fact there is somewhat robust research into AR games and hybrid-reality games (e.g., Serrano et al., 2017; Kari, 2016; de Souza e Silva and Hjorth, 2009). However, such games are not typically the ones that come to mind when someone thinks of a mobile game, and do not usually dominate the top results for mobile gaming in an app store. Match 3 games like Candy Crush, for example, usually are more well-known, and have been studied in game studies previously (Chess, 2017). In this case, it is possible that Pokémon GO is so
beloved because of its position in the larger franchise. Thus, additionally, choosing to examine a standalone game could also offer additional insights.

**Future Research**

Future research should investigate more specific avenues of identity and how they impact the construction of value in mobile games. For example, interviewing explicitly self-identified fans of mobile games might highlight even further how the fan identity interacts with categories of core and casual, and how those intersections might be complicated. Fans specifically might also have different ideas about value in mobile games and might challenge the current literature on mobile games and even fan studies.

Further, it would be interesting to look into different types of mobile games and see if there is any relationship between identity, value, and genre. As I have already stated, *Candy Crush*, a popular Match 3 game, came up in nearly every single one of my interviews in some capacity or another, usually in the form of participants distancing themselves from playing the game. Future research should explore how fan identities are formed around games like *Candy Crush* and to what degree such an identity would have to be negotiated. Based on my interviews and the literature, it isn’t a stretch to say *Candy Crush* is a game whose value is understated or dismissed entirely, so additionally investigating how players understand the value of *Candy Crush* could yield interesting results.

Future research might also explore how procedural rhetoric works in a game with more obvious commercial mechanisms than those in *Pokémon GO*. As I have argued in this dissertation, *Pokémon GO* does make arguments through its procedures about its value, and it does make commercial arguments that the player should invest in it, but
these arguments are fairly well-disguised and more about leading the player to these conclusions than outright selling to them. On the other hand, there are mobile games which vehemently persist to argue the player should spend money to progress in the game, as a number of my participants pointed out. Such games could really highlight how procedural rhetoric can reveal arguments about value in mobile games and perhaps how related such arguments are to commercialization, how players respond to those, and whether procedural rhetoric is effective in those cases.

**Conclusion**

I chose to do this study because I noticed that the way people talk about mobile games is often different from the way people talk about other kinds of games. I became really invested in a mobile game myself and was saddened to see that most of the conversation online was very critical of the game, in a way that suggested that people might not be enjoying the experience of playing it, but were returning to it anyway. Understanding how value and identity are constructed in mobile games helps us to have more productive conversations about why they might invoke so much grief or even shame in players.

My hope is that anyone who reads my study will walk away with a better understanding of how video games, including mobile games, are not apolitical. For those who study rhetoric and media studies, this is a rather obvious thing to state. But in broader contexts, video games are not always understood to have any sort of critical value, especially compared to other forms of media. Likewise, there is a politics to who gets a say in matters of gaming, and I would like to see conversations about video games that are nuanced and speak more to the lived experiences of the people who love them.
**Glossary**

**Catch Encounter**

When the player taps on a Pokémon on the overworld, the screen they enter is called a catch encounter. In the catch encounter, the player uses berries to placate the Pokémon so that they can throw Pokéballs to catch the Pokémon.

**Charged Attack**

After attacking enough with fast attacks, a Pokémon in a battle will be able to use a charged attack. A charged attack is significantly stronger but takes time to use.

**Fast Attack**

When in a battle, tapping the screen uses a Pokémon’s fast attack to attack. It is the weaker of the two but has no drawbacks.

**Gyarados**

A strong Water/Flying-type Pokémon introduced in *Pokémon Red* and *Pokémon Green*.

**Gym**

In *Pokémon GO*, players battle for control of places called gyms. If a player defeats all of the Pokémon guarding a gym, they and five other team members can place Pokémon at the gym to defend the gym.

** Legendary Pokémon**

Very rare and powerful Pokémon of which there is only one of its species in each game.

**Pikachu**

A cute, Electric-type Pokémon introduced in *Pokémon Red* and *Pokémon Green*. Pikachu is the franchise’s mascot.
Pokéball
Round capsule used to catch Pokémon.

Pokédex
Encyclopedia of all Pokémon seen and captured.

Pokémon Candy
An item that accumulates for the buddy Pokémon via steps, when a Pokémon of that species is captured, or when a Pokémon of that species is deleted. Can be used to make Pokémon stronger by increasing their Combat Points (CP) or learning new moves.

Pokémon Type
Every Pokémon has one or two types. Types are a characteristic of the Pokémon that determines what kind of Pokémon it is strong against and what kinds it is weak against. For example, a Fire-type Pokémon is strong against Grass-type Pokémon, but weak against Water-type Pokémon. There are 18 types as of writing this: Normal, Fire, Fighting, Water, Flying, Grass, Poison, Electric, Ground, Psychic, Rock, Ice, Bug, Dragon, Ghost, Dark, Steel, and Fairy.

Pokéstop
A place players can collect items, Pokémon eggs, and XP by interacting with it on their screen. Usually important locations like an interesting statue or a popular restaurant.

Raid Battle
Players cooperate to battle against a stronger version of a Pokémon. If the Pokémon is defeated, each player enters a catch encounter with the raid Pokémon.
Shiny Pokémon

A Pokémon with a different coloration to the usual variety. Shiny Pokémon occur 1 in every 4096 encounters in the most recent mainline games *Pokémon Sword and Shield*, and 1 in every 400 encounters in *Pokémon GO*.

Overworld

The map of the world that the player’s avatar (and the avatars of wild Pokémon) traverse over. In *Pokémon GO*, it is based on real-world location data.
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Appendix A

Participation in this research study involves a 30-60 minute interview via phone or Skype. Must be at least 18 years old and play at least one mobile game regularly. To volunteer, please complete a brief questionnaire at https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/9tKR7XC, and we will contact you to schedule an interview. For more information, contact Michelle at mecarr1@memphis.edu.
Appendix B

1. I am at least 18 years old.
   a. Yes
   b. No

2. I play at least one mobile game regularly.
   a. Yes
   b. No

3. What is your age?

4. What is your gender identity?

5. What is your sexual orientation?

6. What is your race?

7. What is your occupation?

8. What mobile games do you play?

9. Would you be available for a 40-60 minute interview with a researcher?
   a. Yes
   b. No

10. Please enter your contact information so I may contact you about scheduling a time for an interview:
    a. Email:
    b. Phone:
Appendix C
Mobile Games, Identity, and Value
Semi-Structured Interview Questions

RQ:
How does identity contribute to the way value is constructed in mobile games?

Pre-Interview Informed Consent Script:

1. This interview is part of a research study to explore people’s understandings of value in mobile gaming.

2. Participation is voluntary. You won’t lose any rights for declining to participate.

3. Participation includes answering a number of questions. If there are questions that make you uncomfortable, you may decline to answer them. We can stop the interview at any time, and you can choose to have your answers excluded from the study.

4. I will be audio recording this interview for transcription purposes. Your name and other identifying information will not be included in the study or transcripts.

* Ask whether the participant has any questions about the study.

* Ask: Do you understand and consent to be interviewed?

General/Warm-Up

1. What are your favorite mobile games?
   a. Among those, which would you say is your favorite?
   b. What do you like about it?

2. Is your favorite game also the game you play most often?
   a. Why or why not?

3. Thinking about either your favorite game or the one you play most often, think about a typical time when you might play that game. Can you describe the situation – things like where you are, what time of day it might be, who else is around, etc.

4. Are there times when you don’t feel like it’s appropriate to play a mobile game?
   a. If so, what are those? Why?
   b. If not, why not?
Talking about Games

5. Have you ever talked with friends or family about the mobile games you like to play?

6. Are there games you wouldn’t want people to know you play?
   a. Have your friends and family ever teased you about playing games?

7. How would you respond if someone tried to say your favorite mobile game was a waste of time?
   a. Have you ever heard people critique the game in that way?
   b. How did you feel about that?

Worthiness

8. What makes a mobile game worth playing?

9. Are there any games you started playing, but then didn’t like or eventually stopped playing?
   a. Why did you decide not to play those games?
   b. Are there games or types of games that you would never play?

Monetary Value

10. Have you ever spent money on a mobile game, either to purchase the game or for an in-app purchase?
   a. If so, what made you decide to spend money on it?
   b. If not, is there anything that would motivate you to spend money on a mobile game?

11. What do you think of people who do spend money on mobile games?

12. What do you think about mobile games that either suggest you should spend money or that require you to?

Wrap Up

13. Is there anything I didn’t ask that you’d like to share with me?
Appendix D

Participant Demographics

Addie (24, Female, Caucasian)

Anna (21, Female, White)

Ash (40, Female, White)

Atticus (49, Male, White)

Barry (27, Male, White)

Bianca (29, Female, Caucasian)

Bruno (28, Male, White)

Calem (28, Male, White)

Caitlin (40, Female, White)

Charlie (26, Questioning, Biracial)

Claude (22, Non-Binary, Mexican American)

Elere (34, Female, White)

Hilda (35, Female, White)

Iris (29, Female, White/Latina)

Jacob (27, Male, White)

Juniper (29, Female, Hispanic)

Kara (25, Female, Middle Eastern)

Kelsey (24, Female, White)

Lance (40, Male, Norse Descent)

Mae (23, Non-Binary, Filipino)

Nate (37, Male, White)
Ophelia (32, Woman, White)
Red (21, Non-Binary, White)
Rocky (41, Male, White)
Rosie (29, Female, Hispanic)
Sam (23, Non-Binary, White)
Tane (24, Male, NZ European)
Terra (24, Female, Ashkenazi Jew)
Quinn (51, Female, White)
Will (34, Male, White)
IRB #: PRO-FY2020-355
Title: Mobile Games and Value
Creation Date: 1-27-2020
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Michelle Carr
Review Board: University of Memphis
Sponsor:

Study History

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Key Study Contacts

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