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**FOOD PRACTICES AND REPRESENTATIONS IN GAMER CULTURE.  
THEORIES AND ETHNOGRAPHIES OF AN EMERGING FIELD**

**PRÁCTICAS Y REPRESENTACIONES ALIMENTARIAS EN LA CULTURA *GAMER*.  
TEORÍAS Y ETNOGRAFÍAS DE UN CAMPO EMERGENTE**

**PRÁTICAS E REPRESENTAÇÕES ALIMENTARES NA CULTURA *GAMER*.  
TEORIAS E ETNOGRAFIAS DE UM CAMPO EMERGENTE**

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## ABSTRACT

The relationships between food and video games have been approached mostly from biomedical perspectives, producing a stereotypical image that associates sedentary lifestyles, junk food, and gamer culture. Emerging research in the social sciences provides a more complex and diverse picture of dietary practices and connections in this cultural context. This article presents a narrative review with the aim of delimiting the field of study of food practices in gamer culture, offering an overview of published approaches as well as new lines of inquiry. Various elements discussed in existing work are addressed, such as the functions of food in video game mechanics and the limitations of current studies, the emergence of cooking games as a genre and the debates surrounding domestic labor, the issue of culinary heritage, the Eurocentric bias of many cooking games, and the responses currently being developed within the industry. Furthermore, attention must be paid to the interpretation of fan practices, ranging from community rituals to intermedial productions such as cookbooks and online discussions, which reconfigure the meanings of food beyond the screen. This article argues that the relationships between food and video games constitute a cultural space where social, identity-based, symbolic, and affective dynamics intersect, underscoring the need to further investigate their history and to complicate hegemonic and stereotypical discourses that represent only a small fragment of a much denser and more complex narrative.

*Keywords:* Gamer; food; ethnography; videogames; culture.

## RESUMEN

Las relaciones entre la comida y los videojuegos han sido abordadas mayoritariamente desde enfoques biomédicos, ofreciendo una imagen estereotipada que asocian sedentarismo, comida basura y cultura *gamer*. La incipiente investigación social arroja una imagen más compleja y diversa de los vínculos y prácticas alimentarias en este contexto cultural. Este artículo propone una revisión narrativa con el objetivo de delimitar el campo de estudio de las prácticas alimentarias en la cultura gamer, ofreciendo una aproximación a los enfoques publicados, además de ofrecer nuevas líneas de investigación. Se abordan diversos elementos que aparecen en los trabajos publicados, como las mecánicas de la comida en los videojuegos y las limitaciones de los estudios actuales, el surgimiento del género de los juegos de cocina y los debates en torno al trabajo doméstico o la cuestión del patrimonio culinario, el sesgo eurocéntrico de muchos juegos de cocina y las respuestas que se están ofreciendo dentro de la industria. Además, es necesario prestar atención a la interpretación de las prácticas de los fans, desde rituales comunitarios hasta producciones intermediales como recetarios y discusiones en línea, que reconfiguran los significados de la comida más allá de la pantalla. Este trabajo argumenta que las relaciones entre la comida y los videojuegos son un espacio cultural en el que se entrecruzan dinámicas sociales, identitarias, simbólicas y afectivas, destacando la necesidad de seguir profundizando en su historia y complejizar los discursos hegemónicos estereotipados que apenas forman una pequeña historia de un relato mucho más denso y complejo.

*Palabras Clave:* Gamer; alimentación; etnografía; videojuegos; cultura.

## INTRODUCTION. GAMER CULTURE

Video games are increasingly significant cultural artifacts, both economically and socially. They belong to an ever-expanding industry with a growing and highly diverse user base (Crawford 2012; Crawford & Muriel 2023). In anthropology, several pioneering works have examined culture in video games, including Tom Boellstorff's (2008) ethnography on virtual reality in *Second Life* and the social and cultural practices within that game, Bonnie A. Nardi's (2010) ethnographic research on *World of Warcraft*, and Thornham's (2011) work on gender, power, and video games. From sociology, Graeme Kirkpatrick (2015) has explored the configuration of gamer identity using Bourdieu's concepts, while Daniel Muriel (2018) has further developed these analyses through his online research.

Within this context, the analysis of food practices and representations among those who participate in gamer culture is gaining relevance. We can speak of gamer gastronomy or gamer food as an emerging field of study. Most of the existing scientific literature on food and video games comes from the health sciences. The primary focus of these studies lies in the relationship between video game consumption and higher levels of obesity, attributed to sedentary lifestyles and the intake of foods high in sugar and fat (Markey et al. 2020; Joelsson et al. 2023). Around this issue, a biomedical perspective has predominated, analyzing variables such as Body Mass Index, age, and hours spent gaming, while overlooking other relevant factors such as social class or gender. Although valuable for the data it provides and the discussion it generates on sedentarism and overweight, this perspective is excessively quantitative and limited for analyzing the phenomenon in its sociocultural complexity, as it does not take into account elements such as the symbolic importance of food, the emergent meanings of consumption, or other social variables (Alonso Benito 1999). Even though the evidence is inconclusive (Kracht et al. 2020; Soffner et al. 2023) or shows a relationship so weak that it lacks clinical significance (Marshall et al. 2004; Marker et al. 2019; Goodman et al. 2020), the popular stereotype of the gamer as a junk food consumer has emerged (Kowert et al. 2014), characterized by energy drinks and snacks consumption during gaming sessions.

The gastronomies of gamer culture thus appear as a multifaceted object of study requiring greater attention from social scientists. The aim of this article is to delineate the field of gamer food cultures by defining objects, theories, and methodologies that allow for the study of video games beyond this stereotypical myth (Markey et al. 2020) and to contribute to the call for more complex analyses of the food practices of gamers and in video games (Joelsson et

al. 2023). This article presents a critical narrative review of the most relevant studies in cultural studies and the anthropology of food on this topic. Furthermore, it proposes research questions and outlines various avenues of scientific inquiry in the social sciences, seeking to move beyond the reductionist framework of the gamer as a junk food consumer and to reveal the diversity of food within video game culture.

## METHODOLOGY

This article uses a narrative review (Fortich 2013) following Codina's recommendations for this type of publication (Codina 2024). This type of review is not intended to be systematic but rather to provide an approximate approach to the complexity of a specific topic. Narrative reviews can be useful for addressing conceptual issues and proposing research agendas on a given subject (Reese 2022), which aligns with the objectives of this article. The aim is to condense the contributions of the social sciences to the study of food and video games, considering the concepts developed, their themes, and potential limitations, with the intention of highlighting research opportunities in this field.

Search strategies were organized using keywords such as “gamer food,” “video games food,” “gamer drinks,” and “LAN party gamer food.” Searches were conducted in databases and bibliographic search engines such as Scopus, Google Scholar, Sage Journals, and the ACM Digital Library. The articles range from 2010 to 2025, as the majority of relevant literature was published during this period, reflecting the most recent developments in the field. If an article belongs to the social sciences or cultural studies, it has been decided to include it. Biomedical articles were excluded according to predetermined criteria. When a relevant article was found, the references it cited were examined, and those addressing the issues discussed in this article were read. After eliminating texts that did not engage with the research topic, a total of 24 articles and monographs were included.

Following the review and interpretation process, four thematic sections are described: (1) The presence(s) of food in video games, addressing the multiple ways food appears in games and the most relevant theoretical approaches; (2) Culinary video games: the emergence of a genre, which explores the genre of cooking video games and the sexual division of domestic labor; (3) Heritage and video games beyond Eurocentrism, which analyzes culinary heritage, the representation of different traditions, and the responses of the industry; and (4) Food-related sociability: food, play, and contexts of interaction, which examines food within social contexts of interaction, both in-person gatherings and online. Each thematic section is analysed in its corresponding part of the article.

## THE PRESENCE(S) OF FOOD IN VIDEO GAMES

A first field of study concerns the presence of food within video games themselves, its uses, and its representations. Food appears in video games serving multiple functions, each with distinct implications and meanings, depending on the game's genre and design choices. From the social sciences, this issue has been approached through critical theory and semiotics (Ensslin 2011; Maté 2015), poststructuralism (Tyler 2019), and social constructivism (Waszkiewicz 2022).

One of the most important classifications is the one proposed by Tom Tyler (2019), who identifies four possible functions that food may fulfill in video games: restoration, sustenance, enhancement, and as a resource. Food as sustenance is a specific function in a limited number of games where a hunger meter exists and where the player's avatar may suffer the consequences of inadequate nourishment, as in *The Sims* (EA Maxis 2004), *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011), or *Don't Starve* (Klei Entertainment 2013). The consequences oscillate from health point loss in *Minecraft* to diminished performance in social interactions in *The Sims*. This function is typically treated in a strictly utilitarian and individualistic manner, presenting hunger as the absence of food rather than as a social and cultural experience (Mariano Juárez 2013).

Likewise, food often serves a restorative role, replenishing health points. As Tyler notes, this is the most common function, limited to refilling the character's life bar once food has been consumed, with the degree of replenishment varying according to food type. Examples include *EarthBound* (HAL Laboratory 1994), where a wide array of meats and sweets can restore health, or *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (Gray Matter Interactive 2001), where bread and salami fulfill this role. On the other hand, food can also act as a temporary enhancement to abilities—power-ups granting advantages and improved performance in the game. Tyler cites the consumption of mushrooms in the *Mario Kart* series (Nintendo 1992 onwards), which provide a speed boost, as well as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda 2011), where drinking brandy improves negotiation skills. Finally, food as a resource refers to a non-temporary, ongoing form of progression. It may function as currency to recruit soldiers and settlers in *Age of Empires* (Ensemble Studios 1997), or as a means of leveling up heroes in *Dungeon of the Endless* (Amplitude Studio 2014).

Ensslin (2011), in her analysis of the interaction between food and video games, outlines five possible spectra in which food may appear: its integration into gameplay mechanics by fulfilling a function, or its lack of function, appearing instead as display, often of a commercial nature. Second, food may be

concrete (dishes, drinks, medicine) or abstract (energy, health, stamina). Third, food may be organic or synthetic. Fourth, it may be simple or complex, depending on preparation and number of ingredients. Finally, the author reproduces Lévi-Strauss's culinary triangle, differentiating between raw, cooked, and rotten, and also roasted, smoked, and steamed.

These approaches are valuable, yet limited by their semiological interpretations or cultural studies perspectives that emphasize discourse construction while neglecting the interpretive practices of players themselves. The field of user–discourse interaction constitutes an object of study requiring further attention.

Moreover, the analysis of hunger and its narrative in video games should be expanded, as well as that of food not directly consumable but present in the form of in-game advertising (Bogost 2011) or consumed by non-playable characters (Waszkiewicz 2022). Ensslin's typology is also overly binary, since within a single game food may appear in multiple ways across the same spectrum proposed by the author.

The presence of food in video games also manifests in other forms, not solely as a gameplay mechanic, thereby broadening the cultural space of gaming and food. This includes cover art, promotional artwork, or collectible items in special editions. On the covers of games such as *Overcooked* (Ghost Town Games 2016) or *Cooking Mama* (Cooking Mama Ltd. 2006 onwards), culinary elements signal the genre to which they belong. Likewise, food may serve as a promotional element, as in the case of *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* (RGGG 2020), whose marketing campaign included the creation of a ramen dish inspired by the game. In collector's editions, food is also included, as exemplified by the game *Monster Menu: The Scavenger's Cookbook* (Nippon Ichi Software 2022) which comes with salt and pepper shakers in its special edition. Food, therefore, is present not only within gameplay but also as an increasingly important component of marketing strategies, which deserves more attention in future investigations.

#### CULINARY VIDEO GAMES: THE EMERGENCE OF A GENRE

Video games do not only include food as a secondary element within their mechanics. There are also games in which food is the central component: cooking games. These games employ food as the main element in its multiple dimensions, including food production, distribution, consumption, and restaurant management. The cooking genre in video games emerged in the 1980s with the first titles featuring culinary themes. In his semiological analysis of food in video games, Diego Maté (2015) distinguishes three major periods: an initial stage in the early 1980s in which video games playfully represented food production activities, whether as a bartender serving beer mugs in *Tapper*

(Bally Midway 1984) or a hamburger cook in *BurgerTime* (Data East 1982). In this period, junk food was predominant and the body was absent. The full representation of the body is avoided and only ever partially shown.

The second period began in the mid-1980s and is represented by platformers and beat'em ups. In games such as *Alex Kidd in Miracle World* (SEGA 1986), *Double Dragon* (Technos Japan 1987), or *Final Fight* (Capcom 1989), food served as health restoration or as power-ups. According to Maté, the body was no longer absent in this period, but the act of eating was eliminated, as characters absorbed food directly.

The third period began in the 2000s, characterized by management simulations of businesses where the objective was to satisfy customer needs. In this case, the avatar disappears, and the player adopts a top-down perspective. An example is the *Restaurant Empire* series (Enlight Software 2003 onwards), which simulates the management of a small restaurant growing into a large franchise<sup>1</sup>.

The popularization of this type of video game from the 2000s is closely linked to what Jesper Juul (2011) called the “casual revolution,” that is, the expansion of video games to a broader audience thanks to portable devices such as mobile phones and marketing strategies aimed at a wider demographic. Cooking games have usually been associated with a more casual and female audience. During the 1990s, several games of this kind targeted female players (Ramírez-Moreno 2023), such as *Easy-Bake Kitchen CD-ROM Playset*, which included peripherals simulating a kitchen. However, it was not until the release of *Diner Dash* (Playfirst 2003) that the genre gained widespread recognition. Since then, notable cooking games have been released, including the *Cooking Mama* series and *Overcooked*.

Many of these games were designed with women as their primary target audience, reflected in their ease of play and the design of scenarios and characters (Chess 2011). They are focused on food production rather than consumption, with mechanics that vary according to the title. In *Cooking Mama*, the player prepares dishes through minigames that require following instructions from a female character named Mama, such as peeling a potato, stirring a pan, or chopping onions, employing a gestural economy that mimics culinary processes within a framework that reproduces the sexual division of domestic labor (van Ryn 2013). In this series, Mama is portrayed as a guide in household tasks, embedded within the framework of protective and restorative

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that other types of video games have emerged in which food production is simulated, either through mini-games or by gathering requested ingredients, as in *Cooking Mama* or *Overcooked*.

motherhood, exemplified by her reassurance when players fail a minigame: “Don’t worry, Mama will fix that” (Chess 2017, pp. 108–109).

Other games such as *Diner Dash* or *Overcooked*, while belonging to the same genre, simulate the cooking process through time management rather than minigames. Players receive a series of orders to be completed within a limited time frame but do not intervene directly in food production. Instead, they must bring ingredients to designated stations where food is automatically prepared and then deliver dishes to customers. The challenge in these games lies in time management under high demand.

Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that these games focus on food production rather than consumption, and female figures (with the exception of *Overcooked*, where male avatars are also available) appear as facilitators of consumption but not as consumers. This is also evident in *Hungry Hearts Diner* (Gagex 2017), where the avatar is an elderly woman who runs a restaurant during Japan’s Shōwa era (1926–1989). The protagonist embodies a maternal role of producer, protector, and listener. She not only cooks but also listens to the stories of eight customers and their personal struggles. As Víctor Navarro Remesal (2023) notes, this game proposes a “compassionate play” experience through the elderly avatar, who listens to the problems of her clients. This narrative component enriches the game by addressing emotions and the contextual and cultural meaning of eating, going beyond the simple execution of instructions to satisfy customers.

The relationship between discourse and gender is both necessary and inevitable as an object of analysis. Regarding gender issues, in many of these games women are represented as providers of food and caretakers. This is particularly evident in the popular *Cooking Mama* series, where the maternal character guides the player in both gameplay and food preparation. In more recent versions, players must also meet the demands of the father character, Papa. The sexual division of labor is not questioned, and the role of women is essentialized as caregivers. It is necessary to address and complicate gender issues by analyzing how other realities beyond the heteronormative spectrum are represented, and how they intersect with food in this genre, as well as to identify works that challenge the hegemonic model of women as caregivers.

In this context, the analysis of cooking games must move beyond discourse and representation to broaden interpretative perspectives: Why do they emerge, and in what cultural contexts do they succeed? Who are the players, and what motivates them to play these games? How are the representations digested and transformed by players? Who designs these games, and with what

objectives? Is it possible to develop alternative uses? These are the kinds of questions that social scientists studying gamer food cultures must address.

#### HERITAGE AND VIDEO GAMES BEYOND EUROCENTRISM

Some video games have addressed the issue of food as heritage and the potential of the medium to teach about diverse culinary traditions. Video games are a medium with increasing value for transmitting cultural heritage and as an educational tool (Egea et al. 2017; Cuenca López & Jiménez-Palacios 2018). This implies that anthropology and other social sciences must pay attention to practices of representation and the uses of these discourses. With regard to culinary traditions, it should be noted that most food-related video games are produced in the United States and Japan, which means that the representation of dishes from other regions of the world is limited (Waszkiewicz 2022). This presents a problem, as video games could depict a greater variety of dishes and culinary processes from cultures beyond the Western and Japanese contexts, thereby fostering greater diversity (Bista & Garcia-Ruiz 2021). Although some games such as *Chef Wars* (Mindcake 2017) attempt to address this issue by including recipes from many countries, Western and Japanese dishes are disproportionately represented compared to those of other traditions, resulting in neither accurate nor sufficiently broad representation.

In recent years, some game developers have sought to respond to this lack of representation by creating alternative cooking games. To address this issue, video games have been developed in other countries to give visibility to their own culinary traditions and to familiarize players with their dishes. One example is the Indonesian project *Dishcover Indonesia*, an Android game centered on Indonesian food. The creator's intention was to include Indonesian dishes, absent from most popular cooking games such as *Cooking Mama* (Widjaja 2018). The proposal envisioned a game in which users respond to customer orders and prepare dishes through frying, roasting, or boiling, accompanied by an encyclopedic feature explaining culinary differences across the country. However, despite its promise, the game is currently unavailable and no images of it exist.

A similar project can be found in a Malaysian cooking game for Android, designed to promote knowledge of Malaysian food and to compensate for the lack of games showcasing the country's cuisine (Rosli & Mohd Shuib 2020). In this game, photographs of dishes requested by customers are displayed, and the player must select images of the corresponding ingredients to fulfill the orders. Unlike the Indonesian case, however, this game lacks an encyclopedic component and does not discuss in depth the regional differences in dishes or preparation methods.

In Thailand, a comparable project was developed for mobile devices under the title *ThaiFoodAdventure* (Chahisriya et al. 2022). Unlike the others, this proposal took the form of a platformer game in which players collect ingredients to prepare meals. It presents dishes from four regions of Thailand, aiming to increase players' interest in Thai cuisine. Another proposal is *Venba* (Visai Studio 2021), developed by children of Indian immigrants in Canada, linking narrative directly with food production. In the game, the player takes on the role of Venba and her son, who attempt to cook traditional Indian dishes using a damaged cookbook inherited from Venba's mother. Players must experiment to recreate the recipes, while story sequences depict the son gradually developing a deeper appreciation for his parents' culture and Indian cuisine. In this game, elements such as memory, identity, and heritage intersect through food and its cultural meaning.

Despite the accurate observation that cooking games overwhelmingly feature European and Japanese dishes, most of these alternative proposals have not moved beyond academic and experimental contexts<sup>2</sup>, as none are currently available for download from online stores, nor is there information about them beyond the cited articles. It is noteworthy that, with the exception of *Venba*, these games generally lack direct reflection on identity, memory, and culture, or on the complexities of the culinary process that extend beyond the preparation and serving of dishes. Furthermore, food in these games often appears as readily available, easily obtained, and inexhaustible, creating an impression of gratuity (Waszkiewicz 2024) and a simplification of food processes. Future research could explore player discussions on the representation of different culinary traditions and practices in video games, examining how they are depicted or omitted.

#### FOOD SOCIABILITY: EATING, GAMING, AND CONTEXTS OF INTERACTION

Beyond the importance of food in video games—whether as a mechanic, a narrative element, or a marker of identity—it is worth highlighting that there are consumption practices associated with gamer contexts. Food ethnographies of gamer culture go beyond discourse analysis of the products themselves to focus on the contexts of interaction mediated by food. This is a diverse and complex field to which the social sciences have not paid sufficient attention. For example, while there are numerous cultural studies on video game fan communities (Jenkins 2009; Gray 2014), few have focused specifically on food and video games.

The most relevant studies are fieldwork conducted at LAN parties, gamer conventions, and virtual ethnographies (Cronin & McCarthy 2011; Cronin & McCarthy 2012; García-Álvarez et al. 2015; Law 2020; Joelsson et al. 2023; Chen

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<sup>2</sup> Except for *Venba*, which is available on many platforms.

et al. 2024). A LAN party is a gathering where people meet physically to play the same video game together, bringing their own devices (Mayra 2008). These gatherings involve not only socialization through gaming but also through food consumption, generally fast food. This has reinforced the stereotype of gamers as consumers of pizza, burgers, soda, potato chips, and similar foods. This is a stereotype that has been confirmed in fieldwork by several authors (Cronin & McCarthy 2011; Law 2020; Joelsson et al. 2023). However, these studies go beyond simply confirming the consumption of such food, analyzing the broader frameworks of meaning through participant observation and in-depth interviews, as well as the importance attached to the contexts of consumption.

Cronin and McCarthy (2011), after conducting six in-depth interviews, attending eight gamer events (six LAN parties and two gaming cafés), and performing digital ethnography on websites and forums, proposed four major fields of meaning: community, hedonic escape, rebellion, and food as cultural capital. With respect to community, they note that shared food consumption generates solidarity, connection, and group cohesion, confirmed through the exchange of food during and after gaming sessions. Regarding food preferences, they found that participants favored foods considered tasty, paying little attention to nutritional properties. This was further supported by interviewees' statements emphasizing the pleasure derived from food.

On the topic of rebellion, the authors drew on subcultural studies of the Birmingham School in the 1970s and 1980s (Hebdige 2021; Willis 2017). They interpreted the conscious consumption of junk food as an act of rebellion against standard nutritional standards. This rebellion also manifested in the rejection of table manners, as food was often consumed quickly. Finally, the notion of food as cultural capital refers to Bourdieu's (2022) theory of taste as socially constructed, highlighting how culture shapes what is considered edible. The authors (echoed also in Law 2020) noted that expected food was fast food, not home-made meals, and those who deviated from this standard were often criticized.

Law (2020) builds on Cronin and McCarthy's framework, applying it to large-scale video game events beyond LAN parties. Drawing on 20 interviews and 10 focus groups, she reinforced the notion of hedonic consumption and the interpretation of video game events as distinct spaces where attendees could transgress everyday dietary norms. She expanded prior work by introducing the concept of commensality—the act of eating together. This is particularly relevant, as commensality fosters conversation, idea exchange, food sharing, and a sense of unity. At the same time, commensality highlights admission and exclusion criteria—people are not always welcomed at the same table. In

gamer contexts, those who do not conform to the expected food practices may be perceived as outsiders (Law 2020). Importantly, this phenomenon is specific to gamer events such as LAN parties and conventions, not to daily meals.

Joelsson et al. (2023), based on these studies, further nuanced previous findings by proposing the notion of the “Home Food Gamer” (HFG) as a complement to the “Junk Food Gamer” (JFG). The JFG represents the stereotypical image of gamers consuming fast food, specially at events or LAN parties, whereas the HFG comprises meanings and practices in daily lives. They conducted interviews with 43 individuals and attended two video game events in Finland, expanding the framework from four to five fields of meaning. According to them, the JFG reflects Indulgence (hedonic escape), Tradition (cultural capital), Time Economy, Convenience (ease of access to food), and Community. Their novelty lies in highlighting the scarcity of time and the efficiency of fast food consumption at conventions, which allows gamers to maximize playtime and the prevention of the waste of time preparing the food. These emergent meanings, while latent in earlier studies, are explicitly addressed here.

The discussion of the Home Food Gamer is significant, as it is not positioned in opposition to the JFG but rather integrated into the multiple contexts in which individuals act. A JFG may consume junk food at events while maintaining a more balanced diet in daily life. The meanings associated with HFG include Health (nutritionally diverse meals), Family Tradition, Economization of food expenses, Care (more elaborated meals), and Family Community. Joelsson et al. (2023) argue that the same individual may ascribe different meanings to food depending on context, describing the gamer as “multifaceted.” They also suggest that, rather than outright rebellion, indulgence better characterizes food practices at LAN parties and gamer events.

The HFG model is strongly influenced by family, with most interviewees living with their parents and eating meals prepared by them. It is worth noting that the average age of participants was 16.8 years, raising the need for further research on older gamers practices. Regarding rebellion, it may be more useful to interpret these practices in carnivalesque terms (Featherstone 2000; Balandier 1994), as consumption of junk food is framed as a temporary exception rather than open rejection of daily norms. As carnival, can be interpreted as a playful transgression limited in time and space. Additionally, it may be worth questioning whether “time economy” and “convenience” should be unified under a single conceptual field given their overlap.

Video games also serve as environments for food-related socialization in digital contexts. Online culinary-themed games such as the now-defunct Facebook

game *Restaurant City* (Playfish 2009) allowed users to build online identities and affinity spaces around restaurant management (García-Álvarez et al. 2015). Games like *VR Chat* (VRChat Inc. 2014) provide immersive experiences through virtual reality since they use virtual reality headsets. In this game, players have been observed, via virtual ethnography, to consume significant amounts of alcohol during gameplay and discuss it within the game and forums (Chen et al. 2024).

Food practices have also been studied in relation to fan cultures and social media. The relationships between fans and digital cultural media are increasingly complex, shaped by intermediality (Lamerichs 2018). The popularity of certain video game franchises has led companies to publish cookbooks inspired by in-game food. At the same time, fans have recreated dishes on blogs, videos, and forums, sharing recipes and processes. A notable case-study is the recreation of the Portal cake by fans (Lamerichs 2020). *Portal* (Valve 2007), a puzzle game, features a recurring motif in which the AI GLaDOS promises the player a cake after completing challenges. The phrase “The cake is a lie” became iconic, alluding to the fact that everything is a deception. The game ends by revealing a Black Forest cake inspired by a version near the company’s offices in Redmond. This cake became so popular that the developers released a recipe, leading fans to repeatedly recreate it across media<sup>3</sup>.

Fans have attempted to recreate the cake on numerous occasions, posting videos on various platforms and blogs, sharing their own recipes and preparation processes, and engaging in discussions about the making of the cake.

Due to the popularity of gamer-made food inspired by video games, many developers have supported the publication of official cookbooks. Important authors include Victoria Rosenthal and Chelsea Monroe-Cassel<sup>4</sup>. This trend gained momentum after Monroe-Cassel’s (2016) *World of Warcraft: The Official Cookbook*, which inspired similar publications such as *Fallout: The Vault Dweller’s Official Cookbook* and *The Elder Scrolls: The Official Cookbook*. This phenomenon can be understood within the broader context of commercial cookbook publishing (Maglady 2017).

On platforms such as Reddit and Instagram, fans share recipes following official cookbooks or original creations. They also post reflections, reinforcing the idea of active fan communities that reinterpret cultural elements (Jenkins 1992). At the same time, the publication of official cookbooks may also be seen

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<sup>3</sup> LeJack, Y. (2013), The Portal cake is a lie... almost, *NBC News*, <https://www.nbcnews.com/technology/ingame/portal-cake-not-lie-almost-6C9567907?featureFlagAix=true>

<sup>4</sup> These authors began to gain popularity through their amateur cooking blogs, and some companies decided to publish cookbooks based on their video game intellectual properties.

as a commercial diversification strategy that exploits fans through merchandising to obtain profit (Stanfill 2019).

Finally, gamer-themed bars and restaurants have emerged, offering spaces where patrons can eat, drink, and play or watch e-sports. Alongside LAN parties, gamer conventions, online participatory culture, and cookbooks, these spaces deserve attention from the social sciences to further complicate and expand prior analyses. Future research should examine themes such as the meanings of food among older gamers, gender (given the male dominance in most studies), online discussions about the meaning of food in games and the increasing intermediality, fan exploitation, and the symbolic meaning of gamer bars and restaurants.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article has presented a narrative review of the most relevant contributions from the social sciences. The relationship between food and video games has been studied mainly from a biomedical perspective, framed by the stereotype of the gamer as a junk food consumer. Ethnographic studies have complicated this view, highlighting that while fast food consumption does indeed predominate during social gatherings such as LAN parties or gaming festivals, this practice is exceptional rather than routine, as expressed in the meanings attributed to food in these contexts. The analysis has shown how food embodies symbolic, emotional, and social meanings within the world of video games. However, these studies display clear biases in age (most informants are very young)<sup>5</sup> and gender (male informants predominate). Moreover, areas such as gamer-themed restaurants and fan discussions about video game dishes and their preparation remain underexplored.

The debate on the functions and impact of food in video games could be enriched through qualitative methods and interviews with informants to better understand the meanings associated with food during gameplay. This includes issues such as gender and the strong presence of female figures as caretakers in cooking games, as well as the lack of representation of non-Western cuisines. Further attention should also be given to aspects that have been underdeveloped in this field, such as the intersections of gender and social class, the potential of video games to transmit gastronomic heritage and the risks of its commodification, and the representation of non-Western culinary traditions.

Social science research can shed greater light on the complex intermedial relationships between gamers and food, their frameworks of meaning, and the

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<sup>5</sup> Recent studies estimate that the average age of video game players is 36 years (Entertainment Software Association 2024).

impact on identity and consumption habits. Expanding definitions and perspectives on gamers and their relationship with food—both inside and outside video games—would enrich the discussion and reveal the limitations of the stereotype of the gamer as a junk food consumer, enabling a deeper understanding of the connections between identity, food, and play. Food is not merely a mechanical or functional element but also a site of meaning and representation that must not be overlooked and deserves to be addressed by cultural studies, anthropology, and sociology.

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