

Digital Dialogues

Informal Communication Mediated by Multiplayer Online Games

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to explore the nature of non-game related conversations, that players engage in within multiplayer online games. Prior research has found that multiplayer online games do spark conversations amongst players, nevertheless researchers have not delved into the conversation topics that players engage in specifically. Thus, this thesis extends existing academic papers by addressing the following research question: “What non-game-related conversations do players engage in, within the context of online multiplayer games, and how do game features related to informal mediated communication contribute to molding these conversations?”

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with young men who actively game and have experience with social interactions in these games, whether with strangers, online friends, and real-life friends. The findings revealed that online games would not be engaging without the ability to converse with other gamers. The conversation topics were categorized into non-game related conversations and avoided conversations. For non-game related conversations, all interviewees shared similar conversation topics, including intimate/ personal conversations, life updates, relationships, jokes/ memes, country of origin, bullying, movies/ shows, hobbies/ occupation, mental health/ pandemic, and cars. While avoided conversations still occur within intimate/ personal conversations. Furthermore, the results indicated that players interact differently, depending on whether they are gaming with people they know or with strangers. Most players do prefer to open up and engage in personal conversations with friends rather than strangers, though there are exceptions. For instance, intimate/ personal conversations can be shared amongst strangers due to the anonymity and lack of judgement, making online games a safe space to open up. However, despite the anonymity and lack of judgement, most interviewees agreed that they tend to avoid personal/ intimate topics, such as family issues and personal information, with strangers. These types of conversations mostly occur amongst friends, where there is already a sense of familiarity and comfort. Open and intimate conversations often occur amongst friends during downtime, as players have gaps in gameplay to communicate. Additionally, since there is already a base of familiarity and comfort, players also engage in less serious conversations, such as sharing jokes and memes, during these downtimes. Lastly, future research should consider the experiences of women, as well as gamers from more diverse cultural backgrounds, as they may provide further insights to this study.

KEYWORDS: *Game-mediated conversations, Informal-mediated communication, Online multiplayer games, Social interactions, Social capital, Interviews.*

Table of Contents

Abstract and keywords	2
1. Introduction	5
1.1. Academic relevance	6
1.2. Societal relevance	6
1.3. Chapter overview	7
2. Theoretical Framework	8
2.1. Gaming and Social Interaction	8
2.2 Building Social Capital through gaming	11
2.3. Informal-mediated communication	13
2.4. Informal Game-mediated communication	14
3. Methodology	18
3.1. Research design	18
3.2. Sampling procedure	19
3.3. Operationalization	20
3.4. Data collection	22
3.5. Data Analysis	23
3.6. Credibility and Ethics	24
4. Results	26
4.1. Non-game related conversations	26
4.1.1 Intimate/ personal conversations	27
4.1.2 Life updates	29
4.1.3 Relationships	30
4.1.4 Jokes/ memes	32
4.1.5 Country of origin	33
4.1.6 Bullying	34
4.1.7 Food	35
4.1.8 Movies/ shows	35
4.1.9 Hobbies/ occupation/ studies	35
4.1.10 Mental health	37
4.1.11 Cars	37
4.2. Avoided conversations	38
4.1. Not intimate/ personal conversations	39
5. Conclusion	41
5.1. Theoretical framework	42
5.2. Social implications	42

5.3. <i>Limitations</i>	43
References.....	45
Appendix A: Interview guide.....	50
Appendix B: Code tree (simplified).....	52

1. Introduction

This paper aims to explore how game features mediate non-game related conversations. In the digital age, examining social interactions within multiplayer games is particularly relevant, given the increasing importance of communication on online platforms. Considering that players value social interactive features, the voice channel has become the primary source of communication (Simpson et al., 2022). Voice chat enables players to express a wide range of thoughts, whether they are related to the game or not. As an example, a woman shared an experience of an informal interaction unrelated to the game: “[...] I wanted to meet some friends online. And this guy joined. I got really weird vibes from him. He was talking about how his girlfriend left him, and I was comforting him, saying like, "Oh man, sorry, that sucks" (Ruston, 2021).

Online games are purposefully designed to feature interactions through engaging stories, appealing characters or social presence. Hussain & Griffiths (2014) found that players who participated in more social interactions within the game tended to experience higher levels of enjoyment. Multiplayer games motivate gamers to return as it often meets players' social needs. Moreover, due to their variety of social elements, players frequently collaborate with others to accomplish specific tasks or earn certain rewards, enabling them to progress further in the game (Hussain & Griffiths, 2014). Consequently, interactions often develop when requesting for assistance or looking for members to form a group, in order to improve the chances of leveling up in the game or achieve a quest (Peterson, 2012; Lieberman, 2006). For instance, a woman shared their experience within online gaming and argues why such games are great long-term: “[...] I was attracted to the possibility of being able to play a game, at the same time, be able to interact with others. Also, with most games, there is usually an end, or a point where you have exhausted all possibilities. With online games, they are constantly being upgraded and their content is much, much larger” (Hussain & Griffiths, 2014, p. 1).

Multiplayer games can range from cooperative games where players work together towards a common goal, to competitive games where players compete against each other. In these games, players are encouraged to collaborate, to complete tasks, or win matches (Lungu, 2023). Through those interactions, players with similar interests can come together, forming strong connections and creating shared experiences. For example, World of Warcraft (WoW) serves as an online platform where players interact, collaborate and compete with one another. Gameplay revolves around goal-driven tasks known as quests, which become more challenging as players progress. Players often use guilds, task-oriented communities, to tackle game challenges which may be difficult to achieve without group cooperation. Guilds communicate using synchronous text channels within the game, to coordinate activities and build interpersonal relationships (Carr & Zube, 2015).

As demonstrated previously, games not only facilitate social interactions but also shape the nature of these interactions differently based on the specific game features (Carr & Zube, 2015). Prior research has shed light on game-related conversations with the aim of leveling up (Peterson,

2012; Lieberman, 2006). However, there is still a gap in our understanding of the non-game related conversations that players engage in. To address this gap, my thesis will explore the following research question: *“What non-game-related conversations do players engage in, within the context of online multiplayer games, and how do game features related to informal mediated communication contribute to molding these conversations?”*

Examining social interactions are especially relevant in the digital age, where online platform communication is becoming more crucial. It can provide insights into how conversations unfold and whether games should modify specific features to enhance engagement. When it comes to informal-mediated communication, research has been done across various fields such as social network sites and within the workplace, but not necessarily within the realm of online gaming (Lewandowski et al., 2011).

1.1 Academic relevance

Existing articles found that adding interactive and engaging elements could be a way to make the online gaming platform more interesting. This can consequently turn repetitive and boring tasks into something more enjoyable (de la Hera, 2019). Nevertheless, as mentioned above, previous research has primarily focused on the development of social interactions in online gaming, and not necessarily on the development of conversations. Lieberman (2006) found that players often seek interactions to develop skills in order to succeed in that environment. Players often like to help each other out with game strategies, hence it is essentially a social activity that takes place within a social environment. Peterson (2012) analyzed conversations that took place in online games, nonetheless, the findings were limited and only game-related conversations were being assessed, and not necessarily the non-game related conversation topics players engage in. Furthermore, the study primarily relied on observations rather than interview findings, thus the results may not accurately reflect player’s perceptions of their experiences with online gaming. Consequently, delving into non-game related interactions within the gaming environment and understanding player’s motives for engaging in these conversations could enhance academic significance (McLean & Griffiths, 2018). Doing so, researchers can gain a more profound insight into the correlation between game features and non-game related conversations within multiplayer games.

1.2 Societal relevance

Past researchers such as Gioia et al. (2022) did find that there is a strong association between social anxiety and problematic online gaming since it is used by a lot of gamers as an escape-mechanisms as well as a way to avoid face-to-face interactions. Nonetheless, the significance of online games as a social activity became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many gamers used digital games to maintain their social connections and fulfill their social needs (Cmentowski & Krüger, 2020; Tushya et al., 2023). Even though the specific topics of non-game related conversation in online games have not been extensively researched, previous studies have mentioned that people experience heightened social connectivity when engaging in these online

interactions, especially those involving self-disclosure or interactions with well-liked individuals. Social gaming offered a safe and enjoyable space during this time (Ballard & Spencer, 2022). Gaming served as a functional coping mechanism for dealing with social isolation, reducing the feeling of loneliness and enabling individuals to maintain connections with friends (Claesdotter-Knutsson et al., 2022).

Even though people played less in general after the rules were eased, this was not applicable to social gaming with friends or colleagues (Ballard & Spencer, 2022). People also use online games as a means to communicate, to reduce stress or as a form of entertainment (Knezovic, 2023). Additionally, gaming promotes interaction and connection, fostering a feeling of community and belonging. This is especially helpful for vulnerable individuals who may be shy or struggle with social anxiety (Fishman, 2023). Additionally, gaming platforms offer the chance to connect with people from various parts of the world and help develop teamwork abilities (Lungu, 2023). Hence, it is important to recognize how game elements encourage social interactions, molding conversations. Identifying the motivations behind individual's engagement with these platforms can provide valuable insights into social dynamics and the role of online interactions in fostering societal connections (Prochnow et al., 2021).

Overall, little is still known on the types of non-game related conversations as well as the development of conversations players engage in. Furthermore, the type of people players game with will form different social interactions, which may influence the strength of the relationship amongst players as well as the conversations they engage in (Tushya et al., 2023). Considering that technology is evolving and producing more forms for interactions within games (de la Hera, 2019), studying the interactive features within the virtual world gives us a better understanding of how communication patterns evolve and how media continue to facilitate remote connectivity.

1.3 Chapter overview

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework in which I discuss how game elements contribute to the development of rapport, familiarity and group identity amongst players when forming social interactions, and consequently the depth and development of conversations, as well. Secondly, I will assess the issue from a social capital standpoint, exploring the impact of the relationship players have with other players on their conversations. This section will delve into how relationship types, whether bridging or bonding, affect in-game conversations. Lastly, I will focus on the role of media in facilitating informal non-game related communication. I will identify how game features serve as a form of informal mediate communication, that contribute to the molding of social interactions, and consequently shapes non-game related conversations.

2. Theoretical Framework

As mentioned in the introduction, previous research has established that social interactions occur in gaming through various game features, sparking conversations that extend beyond gaming itself. However, there remains a gap in understanding the specific topics players discuss when conversing with other players. The theoretical framework thus provides a comprehensive overview of relevant theoretical approaches and prior empirical research, aiding me in addressing my research question. This framework is organized into four subsections, examining social interactions to understand why players engage with each other and what fosters rapport, and consequently deeper conversations. This exploration aims to assess the development of conversations, particularly how they can develop into non-game-related topics. Secondly, the paper will investigate the impact of player types on in-game conversations, focusing on the relationships formed during interactions, such as bridging and bonding relationships. It is crucial to explore how conversations vary among different types of players, depending on their level of familiarity and anonymity with others. The third subsection addresses the role of media in facilitating informal communication, outside the online gaming realm. Consequently, the last subsection extends the third subsection by assessing online games specifically, examining how they facilitate informal communication, while identifying game elements that potentially facilitate non-game-related conversations.

2.1 Gaming and Social Interaction

Past research showed that frequent social interactions can lead to lasting friendships (Tushya & Abraham, 2023). Interaction between an individual and the environment means increasing their engagement or immersion in an experience, being able to identify themselves with another person, as well as exploring the environment. In video games, as players communicate and exchange strategies on how to win, they become involved together and thus more immersed. Such interactions can create a sense of familiarity, group identity, as well as entry into the gaming community (Hudson, 2019). Social interaction does elicit a sense of satisfaction based on the quality and closeness of the relationship, rather than the quantity of social interactions with different players. These relationships provide players with an outlet to discuss sensitive matters, which they might not otherwise share with offline friends. This phenomenon arises as collective play encourages collaboration and the fostering of interdependence to achieve common goals (de la Hera, 2019). Socialization is crucial in group dynamics, often involving multiple individuals, where effective communication determines the group's performance. Communication serves as an important factor that holds the group together, without which forming interactions and rapport would not be possible. Thus, the focus of this paper will be on examining the importance of social interactions within the context of online gaming and how it gives rise to deeper conversations or the development of conversations, and consequently rapports.

Nonetheless, even though collaborative gameplay (de la Hera, 2019) and frequent social interactions of quality (Hudson, 2019) can spark conversations, individual differences still may influence their efforts and willingness to engage in social interactions with others (Ahuja, 2003). Not all individuals seek social interaction, some gamers do not seek to develop social connections, also players may have different boundaries in terms of the extent they would like to get into when conversing with strangers.

Contradicting the exception by Ahuja (2003), Meier et al. (2021) argued that humans are inherently social beings with a fundamental need to be in the company of others. Research indicates that individuals tend to share or engage in discussions about sensitive topics more freely online, in comparison to face-to-face interactions, largely due to the ability to remain anonymous or invisible in the online setting (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). MMORPGs frequently provide a secure space for players to express themselves emotionally. However as stated above, the extent of gaming-related interactions fluctuates across gamers depending on their social motivations (Kowert et al., 2014). The likelihood of engaging in social interactions through online games is higher among gamers who actively seek social connections and prioritize teamwork within gaming experiences (Kowert et al., 2014).

Those who do seek social interactions may develop emotion-based coping mechanisms through these social connections, viewing gaming as a means of distraction, a source of connection with others, or a prompt for personal growth (Iacovides & Mekler, 2019). Individuals immersed in gaming tend to derive increased enjoyment, placing a higher value on their social interactions. The quantity of social interactions does not necessarily influence satisfaction, instead, the quality and closeness have a more positive effect. The presence of virtual others can elicit the feeling of intimacy, group identity and acceptance, creating a sense of loyalty and commitment (Hudson et al., 2019).

As mentioned above, players become members of guilds, engaging in teamwork and alliance to complete quests for advancement in the game. As this happens through engagement in collaborative dialogues, players can experience more enjoyment in their game participation. Players frequently communicate within guilds to request for assistance as well as clarification related to the game from higher level players (Peterson, 2012). As well as to team up, co-playing could often go beyond mere assistance in achieving in-game goals and forming groups. Co-players can frequently evolve into close and trusted friends, offering valuable advice (Kowert et al., 2014). These interactions often start by asking the other players where they are from (Peterson, 2012, p. 375).

In terms of the development of interactions, Peterson (2012) found that when people first interact, they use positive politeness strategies like greetings, small-talks, humor and informal language, to establish rapport. This helps create a connection and allows for sharing personal information, which is vital for maintaining good relationships. The use of politeness is an efficient method to establish mutual respect and cooperation. It helps prevent communication problems in a situation where social cues are minimized, while also contributing to the low stress atmosphere

within the online gaming environment (Peterson, 2012). On the other hand, Jacobs et al. (2020) found that games provide a unique way of communicating without using a lot of words, and gamers can interact with others through actions or sharing experiences. Hence, understanding how people communicate in games is crucial because games offer a different avenue for interactions.

Highlighting the limited focus on non-game-related topics in Peterson's study, the following paper intends to delve deeper into the development of non-game related conversations. This involves examining conversations in the beginning, middle and end stages of the game, while considering the evolving nature of gaming interactions (Tushya & Abraham, 2023). Peterson (2012) did dive deeper into in-game conversations and how they are formed, but not necessarily the various non-game related topics that players converse in throughout the game. Thus, the goal is to examine how game elements via social interaction mold specifically non-game related conversation topics over time and thus build rapport. Through synthesizing these insights, the aim is to enhance our understanding of how non-game-related conversations evolve through player interactions at various game stages. Herewith, I can additionally explore whether the development of stronger rapport, characterized by enhanced social interaction and the exchange of personal information, is influenced by engaging in frequent non-game related conversations or increased non-verbal cues, such as sharing enjoyable experiences together (Jacobs et al., 2020), during intensified interactions.

Online friendships typically progress through four stages: from complete strangers, to online acquaintances, to online friends, and finally to offline friends. In terms of social interactions, players often initiate the search for gaming partners by posting invitations on discussion forums, specifying their friend code, game preferences, and availability. Once they find a gaming partner, they assess the compatibility of their online interactions without necessarily intending to form a new friendship. During this stage, mutual compatibility, defined by shared interests or desirable personality traits, plays a pivotal role in friendship formation. Similar preferences in video games may contribute to sustaining and expanding social interactions among players, transitioning from virtual to in-person meetups. Some players may be open to face-to-face meetings at this stage, while others may hesitate due to still considering each other as strangers or questioning the value of friendships beyond the gaming platform. Overall, our informants' experiences suggest that shared interests facilitate the development and maintenance of social relationships. Ongoing social interactions, both online and offline, are crucial for keeping these relationships active. Additionally, maintaining common interests and experiences beyond gaming helps sustain online friendships. Face-to-face interactions often facilitate the transition of virtual connections into real-life friendships, reinforcing the relationship (Lai & Fung, 2019).

Overall, it has been found that social interactions within games can create a sense of community or familiarity among players (Hudson, 2019), especially through collective gameplay, as players are encouraged to collaborate and communicate with one another (de la Hera, 2019). Depending on the quality of these interactions, gaming platforms can become a source for deep conversations. This

paper will extend existing research by examining the types of conversations players have with frequent interactions and whether collective gameplay sparks non-game related conversations. Specifically, it will explore if collective gameplay facilitates the transition from game-related to non-game-related conversations. Considering that anonymity can encourage sensitive topics (Cole & Griffiths, 2007), this paper will verify this statement and extend the assumption by identifying the sensitive conversation topics people engage in more specifically, due to anonymity. Aligned with Iacovides & Mekler (2019), who noted that gamers play to connect with others or develop emotion-based mechanisms, this paper will further investigate the types of individuals within the gaming world, and what they seek when conversing with other gamers, thereby identifying common conversation topics that gamers have in general. Additionally, when playing with strangers, interactions often start with humor and general information sharing. This paper will assess how these interactions develop, whether they begin with humor or small talk and then progress to finding similar interests or desirable personality traits, which could evolve into more serious topics and potential friendships as familiarity grows.

2.2 Building Social Capital through Gaming

Different types of social relationships are expected to have varying associations with two forms of social capital, namely bridging versus bonding, depending on the level of closeness of the social ties (Perry et al., 2018). Social capital in general serve to bring individuals and groups closer together, facilitating an exchange of information and resources. Nevertheless, this construct also expects to identify how varying levels of relationship closeness, influence social interactions differently (Perry et al., 2018). Social capital can either enhance or diminish, depending on the social interaction within the game. In addition to the aforementioned subsection, player's interactions reflect the strength of social ties, providing social capital for necessary emotional and social support (Feng, 2021). Increased social capital includes establishing trust, norms and networks, creating greater concern for others (Makridis & Wu, 2021).

From a general perspective, Wang et al. (2022) emphasize, based on social identity theory, that individuals join groups to fulfill social needs, regardless of the type of players they are gaming with. However, individuals are more likely to invest effort into relationships with those they identify with. For instance, sharing a common language can make players feel closer, creating a sense of belonging to a social group with commonalities (Wang et al., 2022). Consequently, social trust can flourish, encouraging collaboration (Wang et al., 2022), which Makridis & Wu (2021) highlight as crucial for building social capital. The strength of the connection players have is crucial to understand the nature of their conversation and engagement. While individuals have an inherent need to socialize (Wang et al., 2022), the concepts of bridging and bonding social capital significantly influence whether gamers develop strong or weak connections with their online friends. Bonding social capital, which involves establishing strong connections, is often positively associated with both online-only and real-life friends (Ballard & Spencer, 2022). Especially during the Covid-19

pandemic, online gaming became a new and interesting activity amongst friends, providing players a platform with necessary social and emotional support. Despite infrequent face-to-face interactions due to various constraints, engaging in social interactions within games can still contribute to the development of social capital among friends, which in turn can offer valuable social and emotional support that is needed (Feng, 2021).

While bridging social capital involves establishing connections with a wide range of individuals, often strangers. Bridging social capital refers to the acquisition of external information or resources from connections outside one's immediate social circle, expanding their social horizons as well as understanding of the world (Feng, 2021). Thus, players may delve into various topics, incorporating different perspectives from their diverse network, resulting in conversations that may be less personal (Wang et al, 2022; Perry et al., 2018). These connections may offer valuable insights or resources that may not be available within one's close network, nevertheless these connections may not necessarily provide mental or emotional support (Feng, 2021). Initial studies on social capital among online gamers indicated that they tend to develop bridging social capital more frequently than bonding capital. This means that they are more likely to establish connections with individuals outside their immediate social circles rather than forming strong, close-knit relationships within these gaming communities (Prochnow et al., 2021).

The level of connection one has with another player, whether they connected online or in real life, induces various feeling of enjoyment and obsession for the game (Perry et al., 2018). Real-life friends foster a sense of connection, while interactions with strangers facilitate meeting new people. Having strong friendships, both online and offline, seems to enhance players' sense of connection. While making new connections, particularly with strangers, encourages reaching out to a more diverse audience (Perry et al., 2018). According to Kowert et al. (2016), engaging in online gaming can be particularly advantageous for players when they extend these connections to offline settings, a concept commonly termed "modality switching". Consequently, playing social network-type games with online friends could establish a foundation for subsequent face-to-face interactions. This is particularly beneficial for reinforcing existing friendships with online players. Moreover, these connections contribute to a sense of belonging and emotional well-being within the social group, which is common gaming motive.

In spite of everything, social interactions that occur in the gaming realm often depend on the type of relationships players have with others (Perry et al., 2018). The strength of social connections is typically influenced by the level of trust within the community and the extent to which individuals identify with other members of the group (Wang et al, 2022; Perry et al., 2018). Thus, it is crucial to understand the types of individuals with whom players interact and how this influences the dynamics of their conversations. Different player types (strangers, real-life friends, online friends) contribute varying degrees to the nature of conversations. Extending existing studies, we can investigate whether players are more likely to open up to real-life friends, online friends, or strangers and how

the conversation topics differ depending on the player type. It may be interesting to explore whether players prefer to open up in a more anonymous setting or a more familiar one. Thus, considering that strangers can become online friends and sometimes even in-person friends (Kowert et al., 2016), it would be interesting to explore what attracts players to others when opening up and the criteria they use to decide.

2.3 Informal Mediated Communication

The chosen definition of informal mediated communication in this research states that technology can be used as a medium of communication which enables information to be transmitted to other individuals, regardless of their spatial-temporal setting (Thompson, 2018). The type of social communication that takes place here refers to the interpersonal exchange of messages, thoughts, and feelings which is important when working in teams. These interpersonal conversations occur via the use of digital tools or social networks. Because informal communication often involves spontaneous, interactive and rich engagements, collaborations would not work well without it (Röcker, 2012).

Conversations through computer-mediated communication often occur using methods that lack visual and sometimes auditory cues, which means that non-verbal cues, such as body language and facial expressions, are mostly absent. However, these non-verbal cues are considered crucial in communication because they add the emotional support that bring people together. With technology innovating, informal-mediated communication has become easier across various social media and online communication platforms (Olsson et al., 2019). The rise in new communication technologies create new opportunities in the media industry, it can transform repetitive and boring tasks into something more enjoyable (de la Hera, 2019). It is now often perceived as a good source to fulfill social needs, open new possibilities to keep in touch with friends and family members, without having to be in the same space (Thompson, 2018; de la Hera, 2019). Computer-mediated communication allows people to connect with a wider range of individuals more personally, regardless of their location or the time of day, and provides access to distant social connections (McLean & Griffiths, 2018).

However, despite computer-mediated communication providing a space for people to connect despite spatial barriers (Olsson et al., 2019), and aiding in enhancing engagement and fulfilling social needs (de la Hera, 2019; Thompson, 2018), it still lacks the benefits of facial expressions and gestures. For example, in telephone conversations, communication relies mostly on spoken words. To maintain engagement, speakers often insert fillers such as, 'yeah' and 'uh-huh', to sustain the conversation flow and prevent potential breakdowns in interaction (Thompson, 2018). Thus, there is ongoing uncertainty how games can be designed to sustain engagement and social interactions, even in the absence of physical social cues.

On the contrary, Meier et al. (2021) would present an opposing viewpoint to the preceding paragraph and align with the perspectives of de la Hera (2019) and Thompson (2018), noting that computer-mediated communication remains a viable means to satisfy social needs and explore new

possibilities of staying connected with friends and family members, irrespective of physical proximity. Because humans are inherently social beings, they have the ability to adjust to online environments in order to facilitate social interactions. Furthermore, personality traits may influence how people utilize media, with extraverts employing it to engage with new acquaintances, while introverts may perceive digital communication as a more comfortable alternative to face-to-face interactions (Meier et al., 2021). Communication can vary, formal communications are often planned beforehand and go in one direction. While informal communication happens naturally and involves back-and-forth interactions, and is rich and detailed (Carr & Zube, 2015). Media characteristics that improve responsiveness, reciprocity, and message exchanges for back-and-forth interactions have the potential to enhance sociability and maintain user engagement over time. Communication platforms that mediate conversations can prompt users to become more involved with the system, thereby fostering meaningful communication (Tsai et al., 2021). Within such interactions, the degree of social closeness between individuals is influenced by the quality and quantity of computer-mediated communication. Adding an interactive touch can keep people engaged with digital systems, making them more interested in the activity and more likely to engage in informal interactions (de la Hera, 2019). In sum, much research has been done within the work-environment, but not necessary within the context of multiplayer online gaming. Within the work context, informal communication channels are used when employees seek feedback, as well as support or assistance (Johnson et al., 1994). Therefore, this paper will build on previous research by delving deeper into informal mediated communication within the gaming world specifically, examining how it enables gamers to interact with others despite spatial barriers. I will evaluate whether gamers utilize online gaming platforms similarly to how employees use technology and media within the workplace, in terms of back-and-forth interactions, to interact and support one another.

2.4 Informal Game-Mediated Communication

The following subsection will extend the general perspective of informal-mediated communication and apply it within the gaming realm. As mentioned above, research on mediated informal communication has mostly been done within the work content, and not necessarily within the realm of online gaming. Thus, this study will delve further into how online gaming platforms facilitate informal communication. The focus of this paper lies in examining the specific features that enable communication within gaming contexts. It aims to explore whether players partake in these interactions for similar purposes as they do in professional settings, such as seeking feedback and assistance, as indicated by Johnson et al. (1994). Additionally, I will assess whether these interactions go beyond the gaming environment, covering discussions about topics unrelated to the game, such as personal thoughts or feelings due to the emergence of rich engagements and collaborations, as highlighted by Röcker (2012).

In the realm of online gaming, the accessibility of technology has grown significantly in the gaming industry, with the lockdown accelerating this trend and resulting in an increase in multiplayer

gaming. Especially during the lockdown, people perceived online games as a social space to stay connected with real-life friends. People played games such as Minecraft to socialize (Bengtsson et al., 2021, p.73). Alongside this expansion, online communities around games have flourished, offering solutions to in-game challenges, updates on game development, and opportunities for social interaction among players with similar interests. As online gaming continues to gain popularity, online gaming communities are constantly evolving and growing. These gaming communities vary widely in their structure and purpose, serving as platforms for social connections.

Delving further into the topic of gaming communities, multiplayer online role-playing games frequently incorporate organized clans or guilds as means of communication among players within the community. These games provide players with opportunities to interact, exchange resources, collaborate, and form groups (Carr & Zube, 2015). Guilds are defined as highly task-oriented online communities in which members with different digital personas, distinct abilities, and proficiencies come together; each player may hold different skills that may be necessary to complete quests. Within and outside the game, guilds frequently foster extensive communication centered on tasks and social interactions. In-game, many guilds employ synchronous text and supplementary tools that enable real-time verbal chat platforms, to cultivate interpersonal connections. There are for instance discussion boards, often in the form of chat forums, that serve as primary channels for intra-group communication in online gaming communities. Discussion boards often facilitate the establishment of interpersonal relationships, exchange of information, and access to assistance from other guild members. Guilds usually provide opportunities for less experienced members to interact with more experienced members, fostering a better game strategy (Carr & Zube, 2015). Nevertheless, there is no existing research on how conversations progress within these guilds—whether it is solely game-related, focusing on quests, character abilities, and forming groups, or if it also extends to non-game-related topics such as getting to know each other.

As an example, aligned with Carr & Zube (2015)'s concept of guilds, World of Warcraft, also known as WOW, is a popular online game where players come together at the same time, often within guilds. Within the game, players undertake quests to accomplish objectives and enhance their characters, necessitating communication with others via text or voice chat. In WoW, various chat channels cater to different needs, including general conversation and voice communication. Additionally, players have the option to send private messages that can be accessed later by the recipient (Thorne & Fischer, 2012). Players can embark on quests together, improve their skills, and work towards achieving common game objectives (Tushya et al., 2023). It is defined as a form of collective action that fosters interdependence between individual players' actions and those of the entire group. This dynamic is believed to extend beyond group learning about the game, also aiding in the development of various social competencies through information exchange and diverse social interactions. This expands on Carr and Zube's (2015) question regarding whether conversations

extend to non-game-related topics. However, information on the specific types of conversation topics remains absent.

In addition to the guilds and chat channels discussed by Carr & Zube (2015) and Thorne & Fischer (2012), game setting will also influence player's interactivity within games. De la Hera (2019) noted that games are typically designed to allow players to play with a personal touch. Consequently, players can shape their characters and lives within the gaming world according to their preferences. This personalization fosters engagement and serves as a motivator for players to keep returning to the game.

Character customization for instance is crucial in role-playing games, allowing players to personalize their character's gender, appearance, weapons, skills, and personality traits. This feature enables players to either incorporate real-life traits into virtual worlds or create entirely new characters. With extensive freedom in customizing character attributes, each player will experience the game differently and will develop different combat styles, which may foster interactivity through these differences (Weber et al., 2014).

An avatar's characteristics depend on the player's preferences, social norms, experiences within the environment, and technological affordances or constraints (Nowak & Fox, 2018). In this context, avatars in computer-mediated channels is a type of self-expression that may influence people's decisions on whom to connect with in the digital realm. They do not always mirror the true self, as some players create identities distinct from their actual appearance (Paulus et al., 2020; Jacobs et al., 2021). Peterson (2012) highlighted that avatar customization can enhance attachment, encouraging players to stay engaged in the game, to engage in role playing. Supporting Peterson (2012), Nowak & Fox (2018) discovered that users often connect with others who have similar avatars. Players often rely on visual cues such as sex and gender as well as similarity and they tend to react more favorably to players who resemble them both visually and psychologically (Lieberman, 2006). Additionally, prior studies by Tsai et al. (2021) found that anthropomorphic cues such as human-like features, along with features that encourage mutually-involving conversations, are key mediators driving effective engagement, as they remind players that there is another human behind the screen. Hence, it is essential to understand which features boost the game's engagement, social connectivity, and consequently, conversations, with the rise of media (Iacovides & Mekler, 2019).

Overall, it has been found that new technology can fulfill social needs, nevertheless it is still quite unclear how this is done (de la Hera, 2019). Gamers do utilize online gaming platforms in a similar manner to how employees use them, to seek support and feedback for game purposes, through rich and back-and-forth interactions. Thus, the function of informal-mediated communication can be similarly applied across different context. However, there is still limited research on the development of non-game related conversations. To extend this finding, this paper will first investigate the types of interactions players engage in. I will examine whether these interactions go beyond the gaming sphere by including non-game-related topics, such as sharing

personal and emotional information, or if they are solely game-based, focusing on seeking assistance and forming groups, as noted by Johnson et al. (1994). Second, as Carr & Zube (2015) mentioned, players often use guilds to communicate with other players for collaboration, resource exchange, or group formation. This research will explore the types of conversation topics within these guilds to determine whether the conversations facilitated are solely game-related or also include non-game-related and potentially personal and more intimate discussions that allow back-and-forth as well as rich interactions. Guilds are primarily designed for members to interact and level up in the game, but as players collaborate within games like WoW, their interactions can extend beyond completing quests, potentially creating a comfortable space for interaction (Carr & Zube, 2015; Tushya et al., 2023). This paper will delve deeper into how these conversations develop and whether they go beyond the gaming's objectives. Third, recognizing that online interactions differ from face-to-face interactions (Thompson, 2018), this study will investigate whether human-like features in avatars help remind players that they are interacting with other humans rather than robots. Additionally, it will extend existing research by examining whether players choose friends based on avatar customization or perceived similarities, and how they identify these similarities when playing with strangers. The paper will also explore how the personalization of game settings can enhance player involvement in role-playing and whether this may also evoke non-game related conversations.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

To answer the research question, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with online gamers aged 21 to 26 from Indonesia, Bulgaria, Tunisia, Italy, and the Netherlands. The selection of this method was based on its suitability for collecting personal narratives and experiences (Johnson, 2011). Brennen (2017) states that: “qualitative interviewing explores respondent’s feelings, emotions, experiences and values within their deeply nuanced inner worlds” (p.29). The aim of the study is to investigate game features associated with informal mediated communication to understand their influence on non-game related conversations. The objective is to identify the elements within online gaming that contribute to social interactions and, consequently, conversations unrelated to the game itself. Qualitative interviews were conducted to: “gather a large amount of useful, interesting, relevant and/ or important information” (Brennen, 2017, p. 27), considering that interviewees have different backgrounds and perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with individuals who engage in conversations on online multiplayer gaming platforms. As part of this process, participants were provided with a predetermined set of questions. However, it is important to note that the sequence of these questions differed amongst interviews, and some participants were prompted with follow-up questions to explore certain topics more deeply and to clarify their responses further (Brennen, 2017).

By conducting this approach, the researcher was able to gain a better understanding of the meanings behind participant’s actions, uncovering why gamers engage in these conversations and the factors that drive their involvement in such social interactions. Individual’s experience with social interactions and game engagement in video games differed, depending on how players perceive gaming features and whether these features mediated informal communication. Semi-structured interviews helped the researcher gain firsthand insights into participants’ reflection on their past experiences. This approach ensured a more in-depth understanding, allowing for a thorough assessment of unique characteristics, crucial for addressing the research question (Johnson, 2011).

Overall, this research aims to bridge the gap in understanding how the rise in digital technology has shaped non-game related communication within the realm of online gaming. Participants were assessed on their motivations for befriending another player, whether it is shaped by people’s avatars or driven by the game’s objectives that foster collaboration. It seeks to shed light on how game features facilitate social interaction, and how these elements uniquely contribute to the progression of conversations during different stages of gameplay, in terms of building stronger rapport. Considering that players may have varied experiences in forming bridging and bonding relationships, leading them to share different perspectives on how effective game features shape non-game-related topics, this research investigated how the development of conversations varies based on whether players form bridging or bonding relationships with others. While participants were presented with the same interview questions, the depth of exploration into these questions varied

based on each player's unique experiences and the level of insight they offer on specific topics (Johnson, 2011).

3.2 Sampling procedure

Participants were selected via homogeneous purposive sampling – they were required to be gamers who have engaged in social interactions online, particularly in non-game related conversations. This sampling method is an informant and nonrandom selection tool, which seeks out individuals who possess the necessary knowledge or experiences to provide the information required. It is a deliberate approach aimed at identifying suitable informants rather than relying on random selection (Flick, 2018). Given the aims and objectives of the study, purposive sampling not only identify specific kinds of people who have an opinion and experience on the subject being discussed, but also people who are interested in the topic and are motivated to take part in the research, thereby contributing to the advancement of knowledge within the area (Campbell et al., 2020).

Unlike random sampling, purposive sampling involves selecting interviewees based on their knowledge of the topic under study, which introduces bias. Despite this inherent bias, data collected through purposive sampling can still be reliable and robust (Flick, 2018). Consequently, it was important to select interviewees with relevant experience engaging in conversations on online gaming platforms. This ensured the gathering of rich information, necessary for me to answer the research question. It was preferable for participants to be strangers to reduce biases. However, some individuals within the researcher's network, who have experience in conversing with both friends and strangers, were also able to participate in the study, considering that their experience could still contribute to the research topic. Additionally, participants were required to be 18 years old and over. Some participants played exclusively with strangers, while others only played with friends from real life and rarely with strangers. The remaining participants played or have played with both strangers and friends from real life. Participants who exclusively interacted with strangers, exclusively with friends, or with both strangers and friends were incorporated into the study to offer a thorough comparison of how different types of gamers influence non-game related conversations in varying ways.

Initially, individuals with expertise in non-game related conversations with their gaming friends or strangers, were reached out to within researcher's network. Additionally, another alternative for recruiting involved posting a recruitment post on social media platforms such as Instagram and Whatsapp story. Interested individuals were able to reach out via Instagram direct message or Whatsapp chat to schedule a convenient time for participation.

Prior to the interview, interviewees received more information on the interview content as well as the interview guide. This way, interviewees were able to have more time to reflect back to their experience and prepare themselves before the interview. As mentioned above, face-to-face and online interviews were carried out, recorded, and transcribed, ensuring participants that their data will remain confidential (Johnson, 2011).

Prior to the interview, individuals were requested to share their age, country of origin, as well as their favorite multiplayer online gaming platform. This data was organized and presented in Table 3.2. To safeguard the anonymity of participants, fake names were used, as some individuals used the same original nickname across different social media platforms, making them easily recognizable.

Table 3.2: Participant information

Participant name	Age	Country	Occupation	Multiplayer games
Raphael	22	Indonesia	University Student	Valorant, League of Legends, Baldur's gate 3
Sam	26	Italy	Employed	World of Warcraft, Fortnite, Halo
Alex	25	Bulgaria	Employed	Gta5 online, World of Warcraft, Team Fortress 2
John	21	Tunisia	University Student	Fifa, 2K, GTA, Warzone
Andrew	22	Indonesia	Employed	Mobile legends
Bryan	26	Indonesia	University student	Mobile legends, Stardew Valley
Daniel	22	Indonesia	University student	Valorant, Overcooked, Ultimate Chicken Horse, Human Fall Flat
Oliver	25	Netherlands	Employed	Call of Duty, Rainbow 6 Siege, Apex Legends
Trevor	22	Austria	University student	World of Warcraft, Counter-strike
Jason	22	Indonesia	University student	Dota, League of Legends, Valorant

3.3 Operationalization

To answer the research question, the four sections from the theoretical framework were identified and utilized as a guidance to structure the interview: gaming & social interaction, gaming & social capital, informal-mediated communication, and informal game-mediated communication. The interviews were approached based on the structure and order of the interview guide (Appendix A). The interview began with a welcoming message, followed by a brief introductory conversation to acquaint each other, and an overview of the researcher's goals. Participants were then informed that their participation was voluntary and asked for their consent. Following this, personal details and gaming backgrounds were gathered. The goal of the interview was to identify the types of non-game related conversations gamers engage in within the context of online multiplayer games and how game features contribute to the molding of these conversations.

The first part explored the various types of conversations held by interviewees within the gaming community. It examined the nature of these conversations, which may vary depending on whether individuals are gaming with strangers, real-life friends, or online acquaintances. Additionally, it investigated whether discussions related to games frequently evolve into non-gaming

topics, potentially leading to more personal discussions. Ballard & Spencer (2022) found that gamers develop bridging and bonding social capital, hence there are differences in conversations depending on gaming partners. Social capital can either be enhanced or diminished based on the social interactions within the game. The strength of the connection, whether bridging or bonding social capital, is influenced by the type of individuals gamers interact with, shaping the conversations they engage in. For example, bonding social capital entails forming strong connections, often positively linked with both online-only and real-life friends (Ballard & Spencer, 2022). Conversely, bridging social capital involves connecting with a diverse array of individuals, typically strangers, to acquire external information or resources beyond one's immediate social circle, thus broadening their social horizons (Feng, 2021; Perry et al., 2018), rather than offering mental or emotional support. Nevertheless, regarding bridging social capital, players might still encounter emotional and personal situations due to the advantages of anonymity. Therefore, understanding the types of individuals players interact with and how this impacts their conversations is crucial. Based on this premise, it could be inferred that informal conversations of a more personal matter occur within bonding relationships, while discussions related to resources for achieving the game's objectives are more common within bridging relationships. An example question could be "What topics do you typically discuss when gaming with strangers compared to online friends?".

The second key aspect revolves around the topics of conversation. These topics are integral to the central question of this thesis, given that prior research has predominantly concentrated on social interactions within the gaming community, with limited exploration into the precise conversation topics individuals discuss (Peterson, 2012). The assumption that games foster conversations stems from research suggesting that games promote collaboration and interdependence through shared goals (de la Hera, 2019). However, co-playing often extends beyond mere assistance in achieving in-game goals. Co-players can frequently evolve into close and trusted friends, offering valuable advice (Kowert et al., 2014). Initially, players may employ positive politeness strategies such as small talk, humor, and informal language to establish rapport, which may later progress to sharing personal information (Peterson, 2012). Additionally, individual players may vary in terms of the effort and willingness they put into online social interactions in games (Ahuja, 2003). Motivation for gaming may differ, some may do it due to higher desire for social interaction and belonging to a group, whereas some may play games as a distraction. Hence, it would be interesting to assess how informal conversations as well as rapport evolve, and to see how the evolution differs across different players with different motives. Interviewees were presented with a list of gaming-related topics and were asked to reflect on whether they have discussed such topics while gaming: "Could you choose a specific topic and elaborate on your personal experience?".

Furthermore, given the absence of non-verbal cues like body language and facial expressions, the third and last topic revolves around how game features facilitate and sustain these conversations to potentially fulfill individuals' social needs (Olsson et al., 2019). As mentioned

above, with the rise of new communication technologies, computer-mediated communication should allow people to connect with a wider range of individuals. As de la Hera (2019) mentioned, the accessibility of technology has spread significantly within the area of gaming. Alongside the expansion, gaming communities have flourished, serving as a platform for social connections. This is primarily attributed to game environments promoting teamwork and collaboration to accomplish in-game objectives collectively (Tushya et al., 2023). An illustrative instance of communication is evident in guilds or discussion boards, which serve as facilitators for interpersonal relationships, information exchange, and quest assistance (Tushya et al., 2023). Alternatively, communication through avatars may become crucial, as they serve as the primary representation of the player's self. Therefore, the interview questions aim to identify the key game features that contribute to the emergence of conversations, engagement, and social connections. It aims to evaluate whether game elements such as character customization and the existence of guilds promote non-game related conversations or if they exclusively initiate game-related discussions. Interviewees were provided with a list of game features, derived from the theoretical framework, and were prompted to consider whether these elements have ever prompted non-game related discussions within the gaming community: "Have these aspects motivated you to engage in conversations within multiplayer games?".

3.4 Data collection

All interviews took place between April 12 and April 28 of 2024. Prior to the interviews, participants were briefed on the study's purpose, the types of questions that would be asked, the recording of the interview, and the voluntary and anonymity of participation. Consequently, participants provided verbal consent before the interview commenced. Interviews were conducted either online via Microsoft Teams or in person, depending on each participant's preference and spatial constraints. By conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews via online video calls, the interviewer could consider both verbal and non-verbal cues, thereby delving deeply into the interviewees' experiences. Following the interviews, transcriptions were generated using online transcription software. All transcriptions were checked and adjusted to ensure that they precisely capture the words that both interviewer and interviewee said. Subsequently, thematic analysis was performed to analyze the data.

Only one interviewee lived in the south of Holland and participated face-to-face. While the rest lived abroad, hence interviews were done via Microsoft Teams. Lastly, in order to find suitable participants, it was important that they were able to share information in English. Semi-structured interviews were carried out, recognizing this approach's capability to gather insights into gamers' thoughts and experiences from their own viewpoint. Ten gamers participated in this research, with interview durations ranging from 25 to 60 minutes, contingent upon the flow of conversation. Before participating, individuals were asked if they have played multiplayer games and to specify which

games and whether they have engaged in non-game related conversations with other players to ensure that they were suitable participants

3.5 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as the most suitable analytical approach for this study, as it effectively uncovers, analyzes, and presents patterns or themes within the interview data, ensuring detailed description and understanding of the data. This specific analysis consists of six steps, namely: (1) Familiarizing with the data, (2) Generating the first codes, (3) Searching for themes, (4) Reviewing themes, (5) Defining and naming the themes, and (6) Producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After conducting and transcribing the interviews, thematic analysis was employed to identify relevant themes essential for addressing the research question.

An inductive thematic analysis was employed to gain a rich understanding of the responses. This method of analysis was chosen for its focus in identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data, aligning well with the research question. As mentioned above, thematic analysis involved six stages, consequently research data will be organized and described in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

While the interviews were conducted and transcribed, the researcher proceeded with the first step of the thematic analysis. In the first stage, the transcript was read repeatedly and data was familiarized by the researcher, ensuring that the transcript retained the information true to its original nature. After the researcher has read and become acquainted with the data, and has generated an initial list of ideas regarding its content and interesting aspects, all the relevant and interesting elements were then coded by the researcher. The focus was on diverse conversation topics and the game features that facilitate those discussions. Thirdly, the codes were analyzed, compiled into a single document and grouped into subthemes and further into main themes.

Fourth, the themes and subthemes discovered in previous stages were refined. While refining the themes and subthemes, it became apparent that some were not truly themes nor subthemes. Hence, the code tree had to be adjusted multiple times to ensure that the conversation topics had a clear link with the game features. For example, some lacked sufficient data support, some themes were too diverse and broad or did not necessarily answer the research question in terms of how game features facilitated these no-game related conversations. To get a clearer overview, researcher categorized the initial codes into four components: (1) non-game related conversations that were mentioned; (2) non-game related conversations that are difficult to have in games or do not happen in games; (3) features of games that facilitate non-game related conversations; and (4) game features that hinder non-game related conversations. This categorization facilitated the connections between game elements and conversation topics, as well as the identification of game elements hindering non-game related conversations and specific conversation topics to avoid. Additionally, following Braun and Clarke's methodology (2006), the researcher constructed mind maps for each interview to gain a comprehensive understanding of the codes and strengthen the connections between game elements

and their related conversation topics, ultimately facilitating the emergence of subthemes and themes. At the completion of this stage, a compilation of unique themes and sub-themes, accompanied by their respective data extracts, was organized, thereby facilitating the creation of the code tree.

This refining process had two levels. The first level involved reviewing the coded data extracts to determine if they formed a coherent pattern within each theme. If so, the researcher advanced to the second level. If not, adjustments were made to the theme or new themes were created. The second level entailed assessing the entire data set. Here, the researcher evaluated whether each theme accurately represented the study's purpose based on the theoretical and analytical approach. During this phase, the researcher ensured the themes aligned well with the data and identified any additional data that should be included in the themes. Fifthly, the specifics of each theme were refined and the core message of each theme was identified, ensuring that it contributes to a clear and comprehensive narrative or interpretation of findings, rather than merely providing a descriptive summary of the codes. Additionally, the researcher ensured that each theme remained pertinent to the research question. It was preferred to avoid themes that overlapped with each other, this was easily prevented by considering how each theme fit into the broader overall story, or in other words the research question. Finally, once the themes were finalized and the final analysis was conducted, relating back to the aim of the research question, a scholarly report of the analysis was produced (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.6 Credibility and Ethics

Credibility is often referred to the trustworthiness, authenticity and plausibility of the research findings. For qualitative research, credibility is established through reliability and validity as stated by Silverman (2011). Reliability is defined as: “the degree to which the findings of a study are independent of accidental circumstances of their production” (Silverman, 2011, p. 360). Hence, it is most ideal if respondents understand the questions in the same way. This issue was tackled by ensuring somewhat consistency in interview procedures in terms of question order as well as question phrasing. This minimized unintentional variations that may influence interviewees’ responses.

Whereas, validity is defined as: “the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers” (Silverman, 2011, p.367), which was achieved by clearly communicating the purpose of the study as well as the objective of the research, to ensure interviewees’ responses are valid and relevant. Furthermore, the researcher integrated member checking into the study by providing participants with access to the interview guide before the interview. This allowed interviewees to thoroughly reflect on their experiences, potentially leading to more accurate responses. Additionally, concerning member reflections, this entails discussing research findings with participants and verifying if their perspectives remain consistent with their initial responses, as participants' viewpoints may evolve over time. This approach promotes ongoing

dialogue and enriches the research process by prompting interviewees to reflect on their own input (Tracy, 1995)

In terms of ethics, it is important to take informed consent from participants into consideration during the data collection process (Flick, 2018). Before beginning the interview, it is important to inform interviewees that their participation is strictly voluntary, hence they can end the interview any time. Additionally, before starting the interviews, it is important to ask for consent to record the interviews for transcription purposes. By the end of the interview, reassure interviewees that their data remain anonymous and be kept confidential, by using fake names on the thesis.

4. Results

After analyzing the interviews, the study identified the following themes: (1) Non-game related conversations, and (2) Avoided conversations. Hence, this chapter is structured into two sections. The first section delves into non-game related conversations, highlighting the specific types of discussions players engage in facilitated by game features. These conversations span from sharing personal updates to casual conversations such as memes or jokes. Subsequently, the second section of the chapter outlines non-game related conversations that players tend to avoid due to game features. Each part provides a brief overview of the theme, followed by an in-depth exploration of each subtheme.

4.1 Non-game related conversations

Before discussing the first subthemes, it is important to note that all ten interviewees agreed that non-game related conversations are indeed prevalent within the gaming sphere. Whether with strangers, online friends, or real-life acquaintances, participants recounted instances where they logged into gaming platforms primarily for social interaction rather than gaming itself. Furthermore, all respondents emphasized on the significance of conversations in sustaining player engagement, without them, games would lack appeal and become dull. When addressing the game elements that initiate conversations unrelated to gameplay, and acknowledging the limited research on this phenomenon, Alex (25, Bulgaria) provided the following response:

No conversations during games, lobbies and all that stuff, it would have been very, very boring. [...] And so when you have time type on YouTube, Euro Truck Simulator online and then you will see that without conversations it's not as fun as it is.

Non-game related conversations include intimate/ personal conversations, life updates, relationships, jokes/memes, country of origin, bullying, food, movies/ shows, hobbies/ occupation, mental health/ pandemic, and cars. Hence, all respondents agreed on the vital role of in-game communication, particularly given the lack of visual cues. The introduction of new communication technologies in gaming allows players to connect with individuals worldwide (de la Hera, 2019), it keeps players in close contact with others, whether they be strangers or friends from real life. This allows them to maintain connections with friends and family while engaging in shared activities. Daniel (22, Indonesia) emphasized the importance of this aspect, while Raphael (22, Indonesia) emphasized the importance of human-like conversations in overcoming challenges associated with the lack of visual cues. He noted that it is often difficult to remember that there is another person on the other side of the screen, making human-like interactions crucial for staying engaged in the game and during conversations.

[...] but because the reason why I play is also more of the way I now socialize with my friends or keep in contact with my other friends [...] socializing takes priority over gaming. [...] We wanted to also do something together. And we found out that gaming online is the best way to do that because we're all far away from each other. (Daniel)

And you know, if someone starts like speaking normally like a human being, then you start to, you know, you have this feeling like, ohh there's another guy at the and at the end of the call, you know, like, hey, that's cool [...] It's difficult to remember that they're a person, like they're human beings as well. (Raphael)

This notion aligns with Tsai et al.'s (2021) findings, suggesting that fostering a sense of dialogue can enhance user engagement with the game. As noted by Carr & Zube (2015), players value rich and detailed back-and-forth interactions to make it similar to face-to-face communication. Gaming platforms have the potential to overcome spatial limitations and compensate for the absence of human-like cues by enabling interactions akin to face-to-face encounters. Additionally, since many gamers seek social interaction rather than mere gameplay, the capacity to communicate is crucial.

4.1.1 Intimate/ Personal Conversations

As Carr & Zube (2015) posited, guilds frequently function as spaces for cultivating interpersonal connections and encouraging player engagement, fostering opportunities for discussions beyond the game, despite the lack of visual cues (Olsson et al., 2019). According to the interview results, gaming platforms compensate for the absence of physical presence by integrating built-in voice chats for instance, serving as an effective gateway to start conversations with others. This interpersonal bond has the potential to deepen and develop into more intimate connections:

[...] for example, in Counter Strike, there's like a built-in voice chat. Yeah. But then let's say, maybe after one game, you say, let's play together. There's discord, right? I mean, it goes really quickly. And for World of Warcraft also everything is over discord. So, guilds have their own discord channels. [...] if you really, you know, click well, things are going well. If there's downtime, you might ask private questions, but like, you know, like, what do you do? Where are you from? (Trevor)

[...] guild, you join like a community of persons. If you are close with your Guild members, like, you're close to them, you can also be friends with them. You can even maybe talk about real life stuff. (Sam)

Put differently, guilds can serve as an initial platform for interaction, and as gaming frequency increases, individuals tend to become more open over time, similar to in-person

interactions. Oliver (25, Netherlands) observed that many players gradually feel more comfortable with their guild mates, leading to a greater willingness to engage in open conversations with them. He also observed that an open, non-judgmental space is necessary to encourage players to open up:

I didn't really know who he was, but we played more and more together, so we became more comfortable. And he opened up, like, all of a sudden to me. [...] Actually, every type of conversation you can think of, because we're very open in our community, so it's very chill just to talk about everything and anything and have an opinion on that without getting judged or anything. (Oliver)

Moreover, supporting the finding that a non-judgmental space is crucial for open conversations, Andrew elaborated on his experiences, explaining that he felt more at ease sharing with strangers due to a reduced fear of judgment. In contrast, sharing personal details with friends can sometimes lead to drama and gossip.

[...] it will be easier to discuss sensitive topics with other people online, because it's much easier, [...] online can be more secured or safe to share it with strangers. Because at the end of the day, they don't really know you, so they can't judge you or anything, right?

The idea that guilds provide safe spaces for discussing sensitive topics is reinforced by the anonymity or invisibility offered by the online environment, aligning with Cole and Griffiths (2007). However, despite the benefits of guild functions and the security of anonymity, eight out of the ten respondents mentioned that personal or intimate conversations are more prevalent within friend circles than with strangers. This aligns with Ballard & Spencer (2022), who contend that bonding social capital—interacting with friends who are already known—often leads to supportive and emotional conversations due to the existing foundation of familiarity, comfort, and closeness. In sum the majority of players prefer to engage in intimate conversations only with friends, whether online acquaintances or real-life companions, where there is already a foundation of trust or familiarity. Nevertheless, findings still varied among players, as some prefer opening up to people who do not know them at all.

We've in fact spent more time meeting each other in real life than online. So, in a way, when we meet again online, we already know who we are, who the other person is, and what kind of person each other is. So, we have already a certain element of trust when we met up. So, in this case, it was not hard to tell about personal things because we were close friends already. We know each other already. (Daniel)

Sometimes it's also good to talk to someone that you don't know [...]. But in my case, for me to, like, to open up to my personal life, I really have to, like, trust you or, like, know you very well. (John)

This observation is in line with the research of Wang et al. (2022) and Perry et al. (2018), who emphasized how the type of individuals players interact with shapes the nature of their discussions. Thus, aligned with Ballard & Spencer (2022), the dynamics of conversation vary based on the individuals, players interact with, whether they are strangers or friends. The way conversations start off and evolve changes depending on the type of player you interact with. With people you know, you can skip the process of getting to know them, and potentially dive into deeper conversation topics right away. The existing familiarity allows for an immediate connection, unlike with strangers, where a connection doesn't necessarily happen immediately:

[...] brother or cousin, you can say whatever. [...] Usually it always starts off with how your day was. If it's, like, a friend or cousin, what he did, what happened in his day [...]. If it's, like, an online person, you usually try and get to know them. What his name is, where he's from, what games he plays, if he's good or not, yeah. And then slowly by slowly, like, depending on how people react, you just go with the flow. Sometimes it's all jokes, sometimes, like, you talk about deep stuff. (John)

With strangers the timeline for the evolution of conversation dynamics fluctuates extremely, depending on how the conversation unfolds, as highlighted by Lai and Fung (2019). Similar to what Peterson (2019) mentioned, you often start with positive politeness strategies such as small talk or humor to develop some kind of rapport, when acquainting a stranger. However, if a connection is established, this may evolve into deeper conversations.

4.1.2 Life Updates

According to Daniel (22, Indonesia), during less intense moments, participants engage in casual conversation such as sharing daily life updates or engage in diverse topics unrelated to the game. The interaction during downtime mirrors face-to-face encounters, with discussions ranging beyond gaming matters:

[...] like within the gaps when you're, for instance, waiting for the other players to join. Or sometimes if nothing really happens in the game. [...] we don't really talk about like cues or like give instructions on what to do [...] topics that are non-game related would come up way more often, we would joke around more, we would talk about other things way more than in competitive games.

Non-game related conversations often occur within lobbies or during downtime. Which means that players often engage in conversations whenever they are not playing, have to wait for other players to join, before entering the game, or when the mission has been completed and players are on a winning streak, Andrew shared that:

[...] like whenever we're not playing, [...] let's say we have to wait for one more person. [...], even though we're playing the game, we actually talk about like relationships, then like hobbies, memes while we're on discord actually.

Additionally, the role-playing mode holds the potential to kickstart discussions when players feel a connection or resemblance with their characters or roles, resulting in conversations that may explore deeper topics or life updates. Bryan (26, Indonesia) further elaborated on his experiences and the types of conversations that the role-playing mode has fostered, aiming to keep players engaged and sustain interactivity.

I was talking to this friend, and because we're, we were both the eldest of three brothers [...] we can relate to the characters [...] like, I really feel for this character [...]. Then we transition to how's your brother? [...] you start opening up a bit, you know, like why you relate, and how your struggles are kind of similar.

As outlined in the theoretical framework, role-playing mode serves as an enticing game feature that enhances enjoyment and fosters discussions about daily life, especially if the plot is relatable or pertinent, since players are drawn to interactive games with engaging narratives and compelling characters (Lieberman, 2006). By immersing players in scenarios that mirror real-life situations, in-game interactions become more meaningful which may then stimulate conversations that go beyond the game such as life updates.

4.1.3 Relationships

Anonymity can exert two distinct influences: it may either promote non-game-related conversations or hinder them, driven by the absence of trust and transparency stemming from the lack of physical cues. This setting has the potential to foster non-game-related discussions, possibly culminating in more personal interactions, as individuals can engage without necessarily sharing personal information about themselves. This anonymity setting could create a form of secure environment that allow players to open up about matters that may be difficult to talk about with real-life friends, aligning with Cole & Griffiths (2007).

Because at the end of the day, they don't really know you, so they can't judge you or anything, right? [...] Uh, and I wanted to say something about the anonymity or invisibility, which enable discussions about sensitive topics more freely. (Andrew)

Andrew (22, Indonesia) brought up an interesting incident wherein he befriended a girl during the game. She confided that she felt more comfortable sharing personal details and seeking advice from strangers on the gaming platform than from her friends, citing the anonymity it provided, as the reason:

[...] there was a girl who shared with us that she was worried that her boyfriend was uh, taking drugs and yeah, that was very emotional because although she didn't know us, she felt safer with us than with her friends.

Anonymity isn't the only factor that encourages conversations about relationships; cooperative game modes are also significant. In these modes, players must work together and communicate effectively with their teammates, which often leads to close, trusting friendships. Within these friendships, players eventually offer valuable support and advice. As these relationships grow stronger, players naturally begin to discuss relationship-related topics.

[...] For example, relationships. When I got engaged, I of course, I told my boys [...]. Like life outside online gaming, of course. (Bryan)

For example, one of the guys said he caught his girlfriend cheating. And he was like guys, I need your advice. (Alex)

[...] a friend of mine who has been struggling with her relationship for, I would say one and a half year has been asking for advice and has been asking for help because she doesn't know what to do. (Daniel)

Overall, players tend to participate more in conversations once a bond has already been established through teamwork, leading to increased enjoyment in each other's company (Peterson, 2012). These supportive exchanges can prove beneficial, especially since some individuals may have overcome similar experiences, and could offer assistance (Kowert et al., 2014). Additionally, conversations about relationships may surpass simply discussing relationship issues with friends or strangers. It is also feasible to cultivate intimate connections resembling relationships within the game.

Yes, I I kind of liked a girl that I played before with and we became such good friends that I was kind of scared to break our bond just over a relationship and we talked about it. I opened

up my feelings about it and she did the same and she had the same type of reaction that she was scared [...]. (Oliver)

In summary, as Lungu (2023) notes, multiplayer games provide diverse experiences, ranging from cooperative ventures where players work together towards common goals, to competitive environments where they compete against one another. These games encourage collaboration to achieve objectives or secure victories. Competitive gameplay centers on reaching specific goals, whereas cooperative games are used for effective communication and coordination to enhance teamwork (Lungu, 2023). Consequently, personal conversations, including those about relationships, often arise in collaborative gameplay because the necessary communication allows players more time and opportunity to open up and share. Also, as cooperative gameplay requires ongoing communication, players have the opportunity to enhance their communication abilities, which they can then apply in real-life situations.

4.1.4 Jokes/ Memes

Despite previous sections outlining how gaming features can initiate intimate and personal conversations, the extent to which discussions veer away from gaming topics varies from one player to another. For instance, Daniel (22, Indonesia) generally engages in more casual discussions that are less intimate and frequently revolve around in-game events. Particularly during downtime, discussions don't just center on life updates; they can also veer off-topic, shifting away from the game altogether and leaning more towards jokes and memes.

[...] We only branch outside from that aspect to something else in forms of jokes [...], it usually comes more spontaneously and not game related. [...], for instance, waiting for the other players to join. Yeah. Or sometimes nothing really happens in the game.

Sharing jokes often contributes to fostering comfort among fellow players, facilitating a stronger sense of connection. Cracking jokes not only mitigates the negative impact of physical absence but also makes interactions feel less forced and more authentic, akin to real-life exchanges. Humor also helps alleviate any initial awkward tension when playing with unfamiliar or less close individuals.

It's really important, but we crack a lot of jokes, so it's kind of gaming and also real life stuff that we're talking about at the same time, which makes it very, very fun to play the game with. (Oliver)

[...] I usually start with a hi, like hello. [...] Some of them are quite friendly, you know, they say hi back [...]. And if I feel like they respond well, I start, you know, to crack some jokes, to lighten the tension [...], most of the times in a light environment, you tend to work better

together. (Bryan)

Aligned with Peterson (2012), during initial interactions, individuals often utilize positive politeness strategies such as greetings, small talk, humor, and informal language to build rapport. This facilitates connection and enables the sharing of personal information, crucial for maintaining strong relationships. The use of politeness serves as an effective means to establish mutual respect and cooperation.

4.1.5 Country of origin

As highlighted by McLean & Griffiths (2018), computer-mediated communication platforms such as guilds and online servers enable individuals to interact with a broader spectrum of people, regardless of geographical location or time constraints, thereby facilitating connections with distant social networks. Additionally, findings from interviews contribute to this understanding by concluding that it is common for players to familiarize themselves with each other's locations, including their countries of origin, through discussions about popular destinations and mentions of words from each other's home countries.

[...] with a guy from Belgium and the guy started asking questions about my country because he wanted to know about Bulgaria, he wanted to visit Bulgaria. We exchanged even emails at some moment and he started texting me about where he should go or what he can do, what he can eat [...]. (Alex)

[...] someone asked like hey, where you from? I'm from Indonesia and like, oh, that's so cool. And then I asked the other person where are you from. Like I'm in the UK, or I'm from Vietnam. Then I say I I know some Vietnamese words, right? So I call him handsome boy in Vietnamese and he's like, wow, wow, that's so cool. (Raphael)

Given that online games connect players from various locations through guilds (Carr & Zube, 2015), players have the opportunity to establish bridging relationships, enabling them to interact with individuals from different countries (Feng, 2021). Consequently, discussions about players' respective countries may emerge. Moreover, Alex, Trevor, and Andrew all pointed out that during downtime, players are expected to wait, thus, they will have time to know where each player is from. Alex, for instance emphasized on his experience when playing GTA Online. Additionally, as gaming sessions become more frequent, most players tend to become more forthcoming, divulging personal details such as their country of origin.

They go through the flags of the others because you can see who is in the lobby and they start making jokes. Hey, you're from this country. Well, you probably eat this. You probably drink this [...]. (Alex)

[...] And maybe if you really, you know, click well, things are going well. If there's downtime, you might ask private questions, but like, you know, like, what do you do? Where are you from? Yeah. (Trevor)

And like the first time we met actually, like we just played the games together, and then suddenly like on the 4th or the 5th game, I guess we started like talking about random stuff like, hey, how's France? (Andrew)

While most players tend to feel more at ease revealing their country of origin with increased game frequency, the number of games required to ascertain this information still varies among individuals. Some may disclose it early on in the game, while others may take longer to establish the necessary trust and comfort before sharing such details.

4.1.6 Bullying

Despite the benefits of anonymity and creating a secured environment as mentioned above, it can also lead to negative non-game related conversations. All players have either witnessed or experienced firsthand instances of girls being bullied within games, often solely because of their gender, as depicted in gaming videos on YouTube. Bryan shed light on the rationale behind such occurrences, attributing it to the tendency of many gamers to target and bully others:

[...] most of the girls that I know don't have that much mechanical skills [...]. They tend to get look down upon, and due to the scarcity of girls in the online gaming world, a lot of guys [...] start to either treat them differently, sexually harass them with like words. [...] because you know, you're behind a computer screen, you're anonymous they can only tell you by your voice or even your gamer tag.

Given this, fostering an inclusive community becomes crucial in cultivating more personal and intimate conversations. Toxic gaming environments frequently impede or discourage interpersonal relationships and non-game related discussions by eroding the sense of security and enjoyment within the environment.

Community is a very big thing because if your community is filled with toxic people who just screams at you for any minor mistake or who likes to just grief you for every game. You're not gonna be able to form human conversation. (Rapahel)

[...] for a female gamer who has gone through harassment while playing games [...], once you know that at the other end it is a girl as well, then you feel like, you're just like me, you know? And then and then you're more encouraged to open up, you know?" (Raphael)

Consequently, all ten interviewees would intervene to protect girls from bullies, suggesting she mute them and interact solely with them. They provided her with comfort and made efforts to maintain the game's enjoyment for her, despite the unfortunate incident. By offering her support, they managed to forge connections with the female player, with some even seeking to understand the gaming experience from a girl's perspective, as illustrated in the example above.

4.1.7 Food

Furthermore, given that guilds frequently facilitate connections among players from various countries (McLean & Griffiths, 2018), discussions often progress from learning about each other's origins to exploring the culinary traditions of different regions.

“You know, what do you eat or like? [...] what is your favorite food that you have in your country? (Sam)

Nice conversation I had was how do we prepare meat? Because in the in the Balkans, each country has its own cuisine, and I met a Serbian guy who taught me the different kind of meat they make. (Alex)

4.1.8 Movies/ Shows

Frequently, in less competitive game modes where the focus is less on goal-oriented tasks such as quests, cooperative gameplay encourages players to collaborate, making it easier for conversations to veer towards non-game related subjects. The relaxed atmosphere allows players more time to interact with each other, often leading to spontaneous discussions on various topics, as Jason emphasized:

[...] In a competitive one [...] very focused in the game, you wouldn't really talk much. [...] we would probably talk more often if nothing much was happening, just relax, you know. [...] we just talk about all the other things outside of the game. Anything in general, movies you know the normal things you talk about with friends.

In line with Carr & Zube (2015), conversations unrelated to the game tend to arise when players are not in a competitive mode. During these periods, they have more downtime to engage with others and possibly discover shared interests, such as movies or shows in this context.

4.1.9 Hobbies/ Occupation/ Studies

Discussions about hobbies or occupational status often emerge, extending beyond the game. This could be beneficial when seeking close relationships with other players, as similarities, such as shared hobbies, often influence whether you could establish a friendship with someone. Players

frequently determine their compatibility with others based on shared interests. They noted a tendency to bond with individuals who have similar hobbies, as hobbies often provide insights into a person's character. Moreover, having common hobbies can serve as an effective icebreaker, making conversations smoother and more engaging.

[...] let's say, maybe after one game, you say, Oh, you know, let's play together. There's discord, right? [...] So hobbies, for example. I remember the friends I'm friends with now, one of the hobbies we had in common was jujitsu. [...] we bonded about the fact that we both like it. (Trevor)

[...] my basic question I always ask people is if he has any hobbies, because I think that hobbies also describes a person in so many ways. [...] if he says basketball, then I know like, okay, okay, I like you. (John)

[...] I'm a tennis player. I ski as well, so I always ask the guys or the girls if they have the same hobbies and then we share different details on where to go to ski. (Alex)

The findings diverge from the assertions made by several researchers, including Peterson (2012) and Nowak & Fox (2018) in the theoretical framework, regarding players selecting their teammates based on avatar characteristics. Contrary to these notions, players do not necessarily base their choices on human-like features. Instead, they opt for teammates with whom they share common interests, such as hobbies, which aligns with the observations of Lai & Fung (2019) in the theoretical framework. Additionally, conversations aimed at uncovering common interests, particularly focusing on hobbies, may progress into discussions about players' careers or educational backgrounds, as emphasized by Alex and Bryan.

[...] Yeah, and occupations just to see how or if you have colleagues who are in the same industry, to see how they're doing and if the company they're working in is better than yours. (Alex)

We talk about our studies a lot. Like, yeah, what do you study? What have you been studying? [...] Yeah, I Exchanged info with a friend because he studies chemistry and I struggle with chemistry a lot in University so I kind of ask for tips. (Bryan)

As new technologies emerge in the gaming industry, such as built-in voice chat or Discord servers, the conversational experiences become more enjoyable and accessible (de la Hera, 2019). The significance of the communicational medium in fostering emotional connections and uniting

people becomes apparent, particularly in the absence of physical cues (Olsson et al., 2019). It is very likely to develop into conversations that encourage players to find similar interests in conversation topics.

4.1.10 Mental Health

The issue of mental health also surfaces within the gaming community, particularly amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Feng, 2021). While online gaming emerged as a new and enjoyable activity amid social restrictions, interviewees reported encountering instances of mental health challenges before and especially both during and after the pandemic.

[...] that's when I saw a lot of mental health issues. Because of the pandemic, a lot of people stayed in their houses. [...] It was bad and one of the guys said I get delivered food to my house and I haven't gone out in three weeks. [...] because of the isolation, he had OCD all of a sudden. [...] we started telling him to go look for an online therapist. (Alex)

Moreover, the frequency of gaming fosters an environment where discussing mental health issues is encouraged, as players can develop a sense of familiarity, trust, or comfort to open up, over time. This is particularly true if the listener can relate to the person's experiences, as explained by Oliver:

Um I helped my friend that I met online get through depression, he was very down and he was almost ready to get it done that. [...] I didn't really know who he was, but we played more and more together, so we came more comfortable. And he opened up, like, all of a sudden to me. And then I helped him get through it.

It is typical to encounter gamers dealing with mental health issues, as many turn to gaming as a coping mechanism for their issues. They often seek support within the gaming community and view it as a safe environment to express themselves and meet social needs that may be unmet in their everyday lives. This contrasts somewhat with Feng's (2021) argument that social and emotional support is primarily derived from closer connections. Despite approximately 8 out of the 10 interviewees expressing a preference for confiding in friends or individuals they are familiar with, two of the respondents deviated from this trend. These exceptions shared that they have disclosed more personal information, or provide assistance to strangers dealing with mental issues, often due to the anonymity involved or when encountering friendly strangers.

4.1.11 Cars

Players are attracted to the engaging and playful elements found in interactive games, such as captivating narratives and appealing characters. Games like GTA often feature cars that exist in the real world, encouraging gamers to play in order to fulfill their dream of owning such vehicles. As John explained, this realism is apparent in the likeness of car models, brands, and even the

occupations depicted in the game to those found in real life. Therefore, it is unsurprising that discussions about cars are common among players when the game centers around acquiring them.

[...] for example, you're going on a mission and there are three guys sitting at the car they're driving in the game and all of a sudden they start asking, what kind of car you drive. Do you drive it good? Do you have a lot of fines? [...] what kind of brand, what year the car was made, what color is the car and how much does the oil service cost in the country. (Alex)

I think I Played GTA or like other games to have the perfect world, like it's similar to ours. But what I always try and do in GTA is instead of living in my life, like if I can't buy a big house in my life, [...] I just buy the cars that I want in real life. [...] it really looks similar to the actual car. [...] the roleplay like the cops there are actual human beings working as cops. So, like it just brings more the real world. (John)

Their continuous involvement in the game is motivated by the opportunity to deeply engage with diverse worlds and roles seamlessly integrated into the game's storyline and goals. This is consistent with de la Hera's (2019) assertion that the ability to personalize one's character and lifestyle is what keeps players engaged and returning to the game. This role-playing aspect allows players to explore different realms and adopt alternative personas while maintaining a sense of realism, as game elements often mirror the real world (Lieberman, 2006). Therefore, players are likely to become more immersed in the game and find aspects that resemble their real-world experiences, providing them with topics for discussion. It is not surprising that players engage in conversations about real-life car brands, given the realistic and appealing portrayal of cars within the game.

4.2 Avoided Conversations

Before delving into the subthemes, it is essential to acknowledge that not all interviewees held the same perspective on their willingness to open up to strangers. Each participant had a distinct viewpoint regarding what they felt comfortable sharing, and what topics they preferred to avoid when disclosing personal information. On one hand, some did not mind disclosing personal information because they were solely interested in getting to know other players. One player, in particular, stood out for being very comfortable opening up to strangers:

Yeah, I'm also very open in in that matter. So, I'm not that antisocial that I won't talk to anybody in the server or anything. I'm just very interested in getting to know the person and if I feel a type of connection then sure, I get to know you better. (Oliver)

On the other hand, some players did not feel comfortable at all disclosing personal information due to the lack of transparency. Nevertheless, most of the players often agree to disclose more personal details after increased game frequency, once they have established a type of trust. However, one player, in particular, stood out for being against sharing personal details because of the potential risk of others lying or catfishing. It also depends on what information you are sharing with the stranger.

[...] I'm not sure that these photos are real and I'm not sure that if I go to Belgium I would go to the Lions den. [...] He might be my age, might be 60, he might be. He might not even be a he. [...] And if they lie, I cannot trust them, and I don't feel safe with them. (Alex)

However, the dynamics shift significantly when playing with real-life friends or after multiple interactions with a stranger. As previously discussed, frequent gameplay can nurture mutual trust and familiarity, thereby prompting players to become more forthcoming, potentially leading to face-to-face meetings.

I won't really bring like private topics, not something to do with my family or like with my job [...] I would just bring that topic with like my closest friend. [...] But because, you know, we played together for like 5-6 months together now, like as a team. [...] last month, we actually met for the first time. [...] we decided to actually travel to Basel and meet her for the first time, she brings her husband and then like, we played mobile legends in Basel. (Andrew)

Players set different boundaries for sharing personal information depending on whether they are interacting with strangers or friends, as well as how frequently they have interacted with them.

4.2.1 Not Intimate/ Personal conversations

Forming intimate and personal conversations is challenging due to the anonymity and lack of trust, which makes it hard to open up. Additionally, the absence of physical presence makes it more difficult to remember there's another person on the other end.

Uh, sometimes you should never be too open on this groups. You don't know who is on the other side of the phone or the monitor [...], or if you share with them your real Facebook profile, for example, then that's an issue, because they can stalk your girlfriend, your wife, your nephews, nieces and all that stuff. (Alex)

Anonymity or invisibility for me [...] that makes it a bit hard to connect with the other guy because usually when you talk about sensitive topics, you mostly wanna share it with

someone you are familiar with. (Raphael)

Thus, in the absence of physical cues and with the reliance on informal mediated communication tools (Olsson et al., 2019), the anonymity feature in games can have dual effects. It can serve as motivation for players to share intimate and personal information (Kowert et al., 2014). Conversely, it can also heighten players' awareness of what information they are comfortable sharing and what they prefer to keep private.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to identify non-game related conversations that players engage in within online multiplayer games, as well as the game features that mold these conversations. To answer the research question, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed. The study's findings indicate that while certain conversations, such as intimate and personal topics, are sometimes avoided, they can still occur depending on the players' comfort levels with each other. Players frequently engage in a variety of other conversations, including sharing jokes and memes, discussing food, movies, hobbies, occupations, cars, life updates, and some personal information. Key game features that spark these non-game related conversations include guilds, anonymity, game frequency, downtime, cooperative game modes, game objectives, and role-playing modes. Gamers engage in various non-game-related conversations and establish boundaries regarding what they share and which topics they avoid with specific players. Hence, the nature of conversations varies depending on the type of players. Most gamers prefer discussing personal matters with people they know, fostering bonding relationships. However, there are exceptions where some players have opened up to strangers, either due to the anonymity provided or because of a strong connection based on shared interests such as hobbies or occupation. All the interviewees agreed that communication is essential for keeping players engaged. Most interviewees enter the gaming world primarily to socialize or out of boredom. Additionally, three interviewees shared that their friendships with people they met through online games have evolved into real-life friendships, as they have met in person afterward.

The first theme specifically focused on the non-game-related topics that players discuss and the game features that initiate these conversations. The findings revealed that conversations range from casual to more intimate and personal topics, with each interviewee having their own boundaries regarding how much they share and with whom. For instance, personal and intimate conversations can occur with strangers through guilds, which can serve as a gateway to befriending people with whom players may potentially connect. This is because gaming can be a safe space to share with strangers due to anonymity. However, personal and intimate conversations mostly happen among friends and acquaintances, where there is already a sense of familiarity and comfort, especially during downtime when players have gaps in gameplay to communicate. During these periods, conversations can range from life updates, if they are gaming with people they already know, to sharing jokes and memes to make the activity more fun and less awkward. It resembles normal calls, however, in this context, gamers can call friends while engaging in a shared activity. When playing with strangers, players often discuss each other's countries of origin, hobbies, or occupations. These typical icebreaker conversations help players determine if they share any similar interests, which is crucial in deciding if this can lead to friendship or ongoing gaming relationships.

Furthermore, the second theme identifies the conversation topics that players typically avoid. Although intimate and personal conversations do occur among online friends and real-life friends,

and occasionally even among strangers due to the anonymity and lack of judgment, most interviewees agreed that they tend to avoid such topics with strangers unless a rapport has been established. The reasoning behind this is due to the lack of familiarity and transparency, players often feel uncomfortable sharing matters such as family issues and social media accounts. Ultimately, since all interactions occur online, there is always uncertainty about the true identity of the person behind the screen.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The results of this thesis show that among the participants, these online social interactions foster a sense of community, crucial for opening up to others, whether they be real-life friends or solely online acquaintances. Building on de la Hera (2019)'s findings that the frequency of player interactions directly correlates with the quality of relationships and increases the likelihood of engaging in deeper conversations, this paper concludes that the transition to more profound conversations is often smoother among real-life friends. This is because players have met more frequently and have therefore formed a base of familiarity that facilitates more open communication. Conversely, conversations with strangers typically start with basic topics, as observed by Peterson (2012), but can potentially evolve into deeper discussions, though not always. Consequently, emotional support is more common within bonding relationships, as evidenced by Feng (2021). However, due to the anonymity provided by online platforms or the possibility of forming connections through media, players may also feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics with strangers, free from judgment, as highlighted by Cole & Griffiths (2007) as well. Especially because individuals within a bridging network may offer more helpful advice than those within your immediate circle, as they might have encountered comparable situations themselves. Additionally, players are more likely to form bonding social capital through cooperative gameplay, as it requires players to communicate and collaborate with one another. This fosters a greater likelihood to talk about non-game related topics and eventually deeper conversations as comfort increases over time. Whereas, competitive gameplay often focuses on exchanging information and not necessarily delving into deeper topics.

Furthermore, the interviews conducted revealed that, communication occurs frequently among players regardless of the lack of physical presence, underscoring its importance in keeping players engaged, as emphasized by de la Hera (2019). Considering our inherent social needs, maintaining communication channels that involve rich back-and-forth interactions, such as guilds, as noted by Carr & Zube (2019), is crucial. These platforms not only facilitate resource exchange and group forming, but also serve as spaces where rapport can develop, extending conversations beyond the gaming realm. Contributing to the theoretical framework, particularly when gaming with strangers, discussions can evolve from common interests to personal topics like hobbies, country of origin, and even mental health, as players establish a base for familiarity and comfort during the process.

5.2 Social implication

As highlighted in the introduction, social gaming proved highly beneficial during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a safe and enjoyable space during a challenging time (Ballard & Spencer, 2022). It served as an excellent alternative to face-to-face interactions, enabling engagement in a wide range of conversation topics, both personal and casual, while participating in shared activities. Additionally, games allow players to discuss mental health issues with friends and strangers, expanding their support network and potentially connecting them with individuals who have relevant experiences. As Fishman (2023) noted, games are particularly beneficial for those who struggle with socializing in person. Specific game features, such as collaborative gameplay requiring effective communication with both strangers and friends, can thus improve players' communication skills, which can be beneficial in real-life interactions.

Given that online gaming generally promotes interaction and connection, fostering a sense of community and belonging, findings from the interviews led us to the following points. The interviews indicated that multiplayer online games are more than just a potential source of negative social factors such as social anxiety (Gioia et al., 2022). On the contrary actually, they provide a platform for players to stay in touch with friends or converse with strangers without fear of judgment. Games lacking social interaction were not engaging for any of the players interviewed, and many participants reported joining guilds or games primarily to converse with others rather than solely to play the game.

5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While all male participants shared similar experiences in conversation topics as well as similar game elements that spark such conversations, it is possible that female gamers engage in different conversation topics, potentially due to different interest as well as different ways of building rapport. The first limitation of this paper is therefore the absence of female participants. Therefore, future research should focus more on women's experiences in gaming, delving deeper into their specific interactions and challenges. The gaming community often favors men, leading to a tendency to look down on women. Consequently, women frequently encounter bullying and harassment based on their gender. This may result in women choosing to open up only to certain individuals with whom they feel comfortable or can relate to, such as members of a girls-only guild.

Secondly, the nationalities represented are somewhat limited, as it only represents gamers from six different countries, thus the results of this study may be influenced by participant's cultural backgrounds. Players' preferences for interaction and their willingness to open up can vary significantly across countries, as social norms and cultural acceptance of such behaviors differ. Additionally, there is a noticeable trend in the popularity of specific games in different regions, with some games allowing more social interactions than others. Therefore, future research should include gamers from a wider range of nationalities and, take into account the trending games in these countries to determine if certain game types are more prone to conversation than others.

Lastly, the fact that the researcher knew some of the interviewees may have influenced the results. The interviewees' responses may have been biased, either because they felt they could not fully open up due to their acquaintance with the researcher, or they felt more comfortable and thus shared more, in comparison to interviewees whom the researcher did not know personally. Hence, future research should exclusively stick with strangers to avoid potential biases in findings.

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Appendix A: Interview guide

(1) Basic Questions

- What type of multiplayer games do you like to play?
- How often do you play this game?
- Did online gaming help you deal with social isolation or reduce the feeling of loneliness?
- Do you frequently game with strangers, or with friends you know in real life instead?
- Do you join groups/ guilds to communicate with other players?
- Do your discussions frequently transition from gaming-related subjects, such as gaming skills and strategies to compete the quests, to more personal topics unrelated to games, such as your interests and life?
- Do you view online games as an effective social platform for interacting with others and engaging in conversations with people you've encountered online?
- How about your gaming communities, do they feel like safe spaces to talk about personal matters?

(2) Conversation types

- What type of conversations do you engage in within online games?
- Can you give an example of a nice interaction you had? And negative?
- How do you engage in conversation when meeting your teammates that are strangers for the first time?
- Do you talk about personal matters?
- What do you talk about when gaming with strangers?
- How are your conversations different when gaming with real-life friends and strangers?
- Is it possible to build trust with individuals you meet online, thereby encouraging conversations, sometimes even on sensitive or personal subjects?
- How do the people you play with impact the nature of your conversations?
- Do your conversations change based on whether you're playing with friends, acquaintances, or strangers?
- Do you feel more comfortable discussing personal matters or current events with certain players over others, and if so, what factors contribute to this level of comfort?
 - ⇒ Do you tend to avoid certain topics or conversations based on the perceived attitudes or behaviors of your gaming companions?
- How do differences like culture or background affect what you talk about when gaming with others?

(3) Conversation topics

- Attached, you will be able to find a list with conversation topics, do you remember a moment where you discussed such topics while playing an online game?
- Could you choose a specific topic and elaborate based on your personal experience?
- Could you think of another topic on the list and elaborate based on your personal experience?
- Are you able to think of a topic that is not in this list?

- Relationships
- Sexual Relationships
- Mental Health
- Pandemic
- Politics
- Economy
- General news

- Cultural Background
- Cultural traditions
- Life outside the realm of online gaming
- Celebrity/ influencer scandals
- Hobbies (Sports-related, books, movies, cooking, etc.)
- Occupation
- Memes
- Beauty products/ beauty brands
- Country of residence (e.g a restaurant you like to go to)
- Thoughts & feelings
- Family matters
- Similar interests/ background/ experiences (commonalities)
- Etc.

(4) Game elements that facilitate conversations

- Have multiplayer games incorporated pandemic-related content, sparking discussions about current events in the economy and society?
- Can the cooperative or competitive nature of certain games influence the content of conversations between players?
- In what ways do shared experiences during gameplay affect the level of trust and openness between players?
- What motivates you to start non-game related conversations while gaming online?

Below is a list of various gaming elements that could spark conversations in multiplayer games.

- Have these elements encouraged you to participate in discussions within multiplayer games?
 - Can you think of other gaming elements that encouraged you to engage in a conversation while gaming online?
- The storyline (engaging story within the gaming world)
 - Visual cues/ freedom in customizing character attributes: Avatar personalization (sex, gender, appearance, etc.)
 - Ability to keep in touch with friends and family members without having to be in the same space
 - Anonymity or invisibility enable discussions about sensitive topics more freely
 - Guilds
 - Challenges/ Gaming quests
 - Cooperative effort/ teamwork is required in the game
 - Fulfil social needs
 - Meet new people
 - Easier to socialize online (introvert vs. extrovert)
 - Sharing enjoyable experience together
 - Exchange information or resources
 - Etc.
- Is there anything we haven't talked about yet that you think may be relevant to my research?

Appendix B: Code tree (simplified)

Themes	Subthemes	Example codes
Non-game related conversations	Intimate/ personal conversations	Guilds/ parties/ discord/ built-in voice chat
		Anonymity
		Game frequency
	Life updates	Lobby & downtime
		Role-playing mode
		Guilds/ parties/ discord/ built-in voice chat
	Relationships	Anonymity
		Co-op games
	Jokes/ memes	Lobby & downtime
	Country of origin	Lobby & downtime
		Guilds/ parties/ discord/ built-in voice chat
	Bullying	Anonymity
	Food	Guilds/ parties/ discord/ built-in voice chat
	Movies/ shows	Co-op games
		Guilds/ parties/ discord/ built-in voice chat
	Hobbies/ occupation	Lobby & downtime
		Guilds/ parties/ discord/ built-in voice chat
	Mental health/ pandemic	Game frequency
	Cars	Role playing mode
		Game's objective

Avoided conversations	Not intimate/ personal conversations	Anonymity
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