“Everybody Here, Their Parents are either Liberal, Don’t Care, or are Dead:” Hopes and Tensions in the Subcultures and Spaces of Digital Games in Accra, Ghana

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Figure 1: Playing and watching games at a party, Picture taken by author.

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Abstract

Africa is often heralded as digital gaming's big next market thanks to a young population and the rapid expansion of digital infrastructure. Drawing on five months of ethnographic research in Accra, Ghana, this thesis explores the culture and spaces of digital gaming in one of the African gaming industry's main cities. Engagement with digital games in Accra, I argue, reflects tensions of being young Ghanaian adults in local and in global spaces. Highlighting material and social access to games reveals how they can serve as a way to navigate and negotiate situations of waithood, while also offering hopes of escaping it through building skills and creating economic opportunities both within Accra and within the global ecosystem of gaming. Domestic game developers, trained at Ghanaian universities, largely rely on foreign funding to develop games which struggle to attract a domestic audience. I explore this disconnect between developers and players through analysis and play sessions of African-developed games, which revealed that many gamers are reluctant to engage with such games due to their perceived educational, rather than entertaining, focus and doubts about their quality and originality. The same players were mostly unconcerned with representations of Africa in popular games but raised concerns regarding the authenticity of Ghanaian elements within them.

I argue that the community and spaces in Accra form a subculture of gamers which is influenced by the values and tastes of the global digital gamer subculture. Members of the subculture actively pursue opportunities to be acknowledged and receive (material) support from local and international society, hoping to improve the social and economic standing of the subculture and its members. This is particularly notable for professionals, who are often involved in educational activities to help legitimise gaming as a valid hobby and career path, and to recruit more members. I further highlight this by analysing Accra's esports scene. I argue that many esports players are driven by the aspiration of being invited to participate at international tournaments, particularly ones in which they can compete as part of a Ghanaian national team. The attention they attract from this, they hope, will open new opportunities to gain sponsors and members, thereby working towards a professionalisation of Ghanaian esports. The analysis of these different parts of Accra's gaming ecosystem highlights the role which the pursuit of acknowledgement and support across geo-cultural scales plays in all of them, borne out of frustration with, and a hope to change, the marginalised role of Ghanaian gamers within Ghanaian and Global society.

By exploring and analysing the largely unresearched topic of digital games in an African context, this thesis offers new insights into young Ghanaian's engagement with digital media, enables insights into the development of games culture outside of the global digital centres of gaming, and contributes new perspectives and voices to both African Studies and Game Studies. It aims to build towards a foundation for future research and offers valuable insights for academics and games industry stakeholders aiming to expand gaming in Africa.

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1 Introduction

In 2024, estimated consumer spending on digital games in Sub-Saharan Africa reached the milestone of 1 billion US$ for the first time.[1] The market's explosive growth, linked to a young average age, the rise of mobile phone ownership, the expansion of digital infrastructure, and the widespread usage of digital finance,[2] is increasingly attracting attention and financial support from national governments and international companies like Sony.[3] Nigeria, South Africa, and Morocco have each introduced programs on national or regional levels which are targeted towards supporting local game developers.[4] Yet, this large-scale narrative of growth and progress ignores the tensions and challenges created by various factors limiting African players and developers' access to the global games ecosystem. Regular power outages, unreliable infrastructure, and high costs, among many others, continue to limit the ways in which most people on the continent can interact with digital games.

In this thesis I explore the culture of digital games in Accra, Ghana. My focus is the people involved in games culture as players, fans, organisers, developers, and many other roles. I highlight their voices and experiences, building on them to analyse their position within the subculture of Gamers, Ghanaian society, and within the global ecosystem of digital games.

The growth of interest in digital games in Africa has not yet expanded to academia. Research on digital games (not including gambling) remains largely absent from African Studies, and few Games Studies scholars venture into discussing the continent, its people, and their role within the global gaming ecosystem. With my thesis, I hope to work towards addressing this gap. Understanding gaming and players' engagement with its subculture yields valuable insights into the experiences of (young) Ghanaians in the modern, digital world.

1.1: Situating My Research

Geographically, my research is situated primarily in the city of Accra, Ghana's capital inhabited by an estimated two to six million (depending on classification of the city limits) people. The city boasts a relatively-well developed digital infrastructure which enables access to the digital realm for many of its inhabitants. Across Ghana, an estimated 27% of all Ghanaians regularly play digital games, spending more money on games than players in all but 2 other Sub-Saharan African countries.[5] Together with a well-connected community of professionals in game development and adjacent sectors, various kinds of digital entrepreneurship, and the arts, Accra can be considered of the centres of games culture on the African continent. These factors make Ghana, and Accra in particular, a good space for exploring the role of gaming in an African setting.

For my thesis research I spent five months, from August to December of 2024, living in the city. My research concerns both the city and the (social and physical) spaces within it but also goes beyond that in looking at Accra and its inhabitants as part of a global space. I am interested not just in

[1] Carry1st, 'African Gaming Market Defies Global Trends and Continues to Grow Exponentially - New Data Reveals', Carry1st, accessed 3 June 2024, https://www.carry1st.com/press-releases/african-gaming-market-defies-global-trends-and-continues-to-grow-exponentially---new-data-reveals.
[2] Wesley Kirinya, 'Africa', in *Video Games around the World*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2015), 28.
[3] Ryan Browne, 'Sony Is Making a Bold Bet on an African Gaming Startup to Boost PlayStation's Reach in the Continent', CNBC, 29 January 2024, https://www.cnbc.com/2024/01/29/playstation-maker-sony-invests-in-african-gaming-startup-carry1st-.html.
[4] Maliyo Games, '2025 Africa Games Industry Report', 2025, 38.
[5] Maliyo Games, '2024 Africa Games Industry Report', 2024, 35–36.

the local structures of Accra's gaming ecosystem, but in how those structures reflect global patterns. Based on these global patterns, I draw on research from other parts of the world, with scholarship on games and the digital realm covering Latin America and South and Southeast Asia yielding many valuable insights and often allowing for interesting comparisons, highlighting how despite being driven by local contexts, digital games are a global medium. Players all over the globe face similar struggles and tensions, often navigating them in similar manners and likely sharing their frustrations and strategies with their peers across the globe.

Academically, I consider this thesis located within the disciplines of African Studies and Game Studies. As I elaborate in my methodology, both are heavily interdisciplinary, as is my previous academic education. Game Studies, often tracing its lineage back to Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*,[6] is concerned with the contents, production, perception of and reactions to (mostly digital) games and the people that play and produce them, and the culture surrounding them. I do not focus on the specifics of what constitutes a game or the act of playing in this thesis, adopting an inclusive definition which considers various types of interactive and digital entertainment media as games. Within Game Studies, I particularly draw on the scholarship of regional game studies, the subdiscipline which

"investigates games and gaming cultures at a range of geocultural scales, identifies connections across and between these scales, highlights and addresses unequal global power relations within gaming culture and within the academic study of games, and enriches the field with new perspectives drawn from regional cultural contexts."[7]

Regional game studies specifically often does so with a strong view towards in-person ethnographic experiences. Here, the link to African Studies is most clear. Beyond my research being geographically located in Africa, African Studies scholarship shapes the ways I think about and analyse the experiences I made during my research. Most notably I draw on scholarship discussing African media, and Africa's role in the digital world, and the often precarious position of African youth within society.

1.2 Research Questions

In the vein of Philip Penix-Tadsen and Souvik Mukherjee who have conducted similar research for Latin America and the Indian subcontinent respectively, I am interested in addressing the lack of games scholarship covering my region of focus, highlighting the local adaptions and games cultures of Ghana and how they reflect its players, and connecting to larger discussions on digital media cultures.[8] My research explores the games culture of Accra and how it is shaped by both local and global factors. Players' and developers' engagement with games, I argue, highlights aspirations of support and acknowledgement beyond the community, but also frustrations at Ghana's often marginal position within the digital ecosystem and the limited opportunities available to many young Ghanaians.

My research is guided by the question of how the engagement with digital games and Accra's games culture reflects the aspirations, tensions, and feelings of (not) belonging in a globalised digital world which are felt by many (young) Ghanaians. To approach this question, I explore why both

[6] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1950), http://archive.org/details/homoludensstudyo1950huiz.
[7] Bjarke Liboriussen and Paul Martin, 'Regional Game Studies', *Game Studies* 16, no. 1 (2016), https://gamestudies.org/1601/articles/liboriussen.
[8] Souvik Mukherjee, *Videogames in the Indian Subcontinent: Development, Culture(s) and Representations* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury India, 2022), 5–6; Phillip Penix-Tadsen, *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016), 2.

hopefulness and resignation are common emotions felt by my interlocutors and how they connect to the experience of playing digital games in Accra.

Using an access lens, I explore the digital materiality of gaming in Accra and how distinct material factors help explain of mobile gaming's dominance in Africa. I further investigate why many Ghanaian players deliberately chose not to play locally produced games and how their opinion of the representation of Africa in games links to their opinion of their own, and Africa's, role in a modern world. Drawing on discussions of subculture, I look at the factors which shape the social and physical spaces of gaming in Accra and how they are shaped by the aspirations of people within the (sub)culture. Additionally, I explore why hopefulness and the pursuit of acknowledgement and (material) support appeared central to most commercial gaming activities I encountered throughout my stay in Accra. Combining the insights and analyses of these questions, will, I hope, allow me to approach a well-rounded and multidisciplinary response to my guiding question while also describing the gaming ecosystem of Accra.

1.3 Thesis Structure

Each chapter of my thesis is largely centred around a specific topic, through which I hope to cover the breadth of experiences of Accra's gaming culture and work towards answering the questions which guide this research by showing both unique factors and linkages between the different topics.

In the following chapter, I discuss the methodologies and frameworks which guide my research. Given that I am operating in an academically fairly original and novel topic,[9] I try to explain the various ways I approached my research and my inspirations and motivation behind those choices. I also discuss my positionality and reflect on some of the difficulties I faced during my research stay. Chapter 3 focuses on players' access to games and their ecosystem. Throughout my research, it became obvious that these access issues were key to my interlocutors' experiences. Using the concept of digital materiality, I highlight various factors of the Ghanaian context which limit players' ability to engage with digital games. I analyse how these factors relate to the role of Ghana in the digital world and how players navigate the frustrations and challenges posed by their limited access. Expanding to social access, I additionally explore how social tensions, in the forms of stigmatisation and social constraints interact with material access issues and shape how players access games. These tensions, I argue, are not unique to gaming but connect to the frustrations common to the experience of African youth. Chapter 4 similarly concerns a common tension I encountered: Ghanaian developers struggle to attract a domestic audience, with players deliberately choosing not to play local games. Based on interviews and play-sessions, I explore how Ghanaian players feel about locally produced digital games and how this lack of engagement ties into global patterns of funding, imaginaries of Africa's position in the world, and representations of African culture.

Chapter 5 discusses the culture of gaming in Accra and the spaces it happens in. I look at the how, why, where, and who of playing digital games in Accra. Each of these, I argue, are not just matters of taste, but reflect the state and history of gaming in Ghanaian society. I look at people engaged in games through the lens of subculture, exploring how communities form and interact. As my interlocutors regularly pointed out, these communities are shaped by their members' passion for gaming, and their hopes for support and acknowledgement. These aspirations link to the experiences of many of the players, who have to navigate uncertain situations in which the image of a better life is available, but out of reach. As part of this I also discuss community spaces like game centres and conventions, key

[9] In part because of this, I chose not to write a distinct literature review, instead opting to incorporate discussions of existing literature throughout my chapters as is relevant.

meeting spaces with which the organisers hope to give back to their community. Lastly, Chapter 6 looks at the people professionally and financially involved in the games industry, focusing on game developers and esports organisers and players. I highlight how both are shaped by their connections to the global gaming ecosystem through funding and international networks. For game developers, the latter consists primarily of mentorship and partnership networks, with the vast majority of developers being locally trained and combining their formal education with autodidactically-acquired skills. For esports, international organisations host tournaments which skilled players can qualify for. As I argue in the chapter, the opportunity to travel internationally is a driving factor behind players' involvement, as they hope to not only attain financial independence for themselves, but to build the structure that enables it for their peers.

2 Methodology

As previously noted, this thesis is situated in the academic disciplines of Game Studies and African Studies, both disciplines which are very broad and interdisciplinary in their approaches and methodologies. African Studies covers a wide range of disciplines, scholars, and professionals, each with their own backgrounds, experiences, and methods. Only through combining and navigating this breadth of research is it possible to approach an understanding of the continent and its people. Similarly, Ingrid Richardson, Larissa Hjorth, and Hugh Davies stress the need for interdisciplinary approaches to studying games, the people which play them, and the culture around them.[10] In line with this, my research aims to draw on various methodologies in order to be able to respectfully and properly represent the insights and experiences of my interlocutors and myself. In this chapter, I highlight the methodological and theoretical choices I made as part of the process of researching and writing this thesis. As there is limited existing scholarship covering gaming in an African context, I primarily draw inspiration from scholarship on digital interactions in Africa and scholarship on gaming in Global South contexts.

2.1 Ethnography

The methodological core of my research consists of ethnography. Throughout my five months in Accra, I visited various sites of digital play and related activities, ranging from game centres and esports tournaments to parties and professional conferences. Throughout these various visits, I engaged in participant-observation, interacting and engaging with my interlocutors and the communities I sought to investigate. By discussing my research intentions, preliminary findings, and expectations with my informants, and by regularly reflecting on these conversations and my findings, I sought to fully utilize an iterative-inductive approach.[11] While I am uncertain if I fully explored the potential of such an approach, I hope that the adjustments I made to my research manage to represent the concerns and inputs raised by my interlocutors.

Throughout my interactions I was fully open about my researcher identity, intent, and objectives. As my topic carries little risk or controversy, I saw no reason or justification to engage in covert observation, although the size of some of the research spaces meant not everyone was fully aware of my researcher status and, as I later learned, some people assumed I was an (overseas) employee of a gaming company or working for a funding agency.[12] As this misunderstanding was easily cleared up when talking with people, I do not assume it had a notable effect on my data. Beyond disclosing my researcher status, I usually carried a pocket-size notebook with me to allow me to actively take notes whenever I left the house. In order to draw on the full range of perception, I tried to note down not just interesting statements and connections, but also all types of impressions - visual, auditory, so on - and relevant thoughts I had. The notebook, I hope, further signalled my researcher status, with observers sometimes asking what I had deemed notable enough to note down. I shared these notes openly (as it never included anything I deemed controversial or risky), which often drew both amused and sceptical questions about their relevance, such as my various notes on the sounds and lights at venues, or in one notable case, my note that "somebody brought a katana and now everybody wants to swing it around"[13] at one party. This often led to interesting follow-up questions about my methodology, findings, and research aims, enabling some reflective insights.

[10] Ingrid Richardson, Larissa Hjorth, and Hugh Davies, *Understanding Games and Game Cultures* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2021), 19, https://www.torrossa.com/en/resources/an/5018885.
[11] Karen O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 2nd ed (London New York: Routledge, 2012), 29–31.
[12] This assumption, combined with the funding structure of Accra's game industry I discuss in chapters 4 and 6, may be interesting to investigate further at a future date.
[13] Notebook Entry, 27 September 2024.

The description of my research topic and aims was usually met with a similar mixture of confused amusement and enthusiasm. Players often initially wondered whether there would be enough to talk about, how it was relevant (particularly to somebody coming in from abroad), and whether the topic was legitimate for academic research. Following this however, most interlocutors were enthusiastic to share their experiences and insights with me, sometimes referring me to their friends who may be interesting to talk to or offering their help with future questions and various issues I may run into during my research. Interlocutors professionally involved in the games industry, such as esports organisers and game developers, spent less time wondering about relevance, but were just as - if not more - enthusiastic to share their experiences, with Leti Arts founder Eyram Tawia highlighting the need for more academic attention to African Games during an interview. As I describe below, some likely came to consider me as a potential advocate for their efforts of promoting their events and creations.

Most interviews I had with interlocutors as part of my ethnography were unstructured or semi-structured in nature. They started as everyday conversations and sometimes developed into more specific, targeted discussions, such as with Arthur, an Uber driver and game developer who had noticed I was driving to the offices of game developers Leti Arts and began talking about his work. Over time I developed a mental checklist of questions and anecdotes which I would draw on as conversations progressed. Of course, conversations often went into new, unexpected directions, offering new insights and perspectives even when I thought I had already heard a lot about a given topic.

I regularly digitised my notes as plaintext files, stored both on my laptop and on a cloud service. While my material did not call for increased safety precautions, I chose to use an encrypted cloud storage and primarily accessed the internet through a Virtual Private Network (VPN) in line with the best data security and data management practices suggested by Leiden University.[14] My cloud storage backups prevented a significant amount of data loss when, a month into my research stay, a power surge corrupted my laptop's hard drive. Despite this - and my backup laptop breaking later during my stay because of faulty hardware - I lost almost no data and could draw on my full insights during my writing process.

2.2 Interview and Play Session Methods

In addition to my ethnography, I chose to conduct a series of (mostly) structured one-to-one interviews with interested interlocutors I met throughout my research. These interviews allowed me to directly engage with specific topics and themes I identified throughout my conversations. As part of this, I prepared specific questions for esports athletes, organisers, and game developers in order to gain insights beyond what I could get from participant-observation. When the time was available, I followed up the interviews with reflective play sessions utilising the methods of Thinking Aloud and Stimulated Recall. These play sessions were intended to yield additional insights into the ways players interact with and think about games, particularly in the context of African-developed games, with much of Chapter 4 building on these sessions. There, I also describe the specific media I used throughout the play sessions in more detail. The play sessions were recorded with a camera pointed at the player's phone[15] and recording their voice.

Thinking Aloud refers to a method focused on the player's experience of gameplay. The player is asked to verbally express their thoughts, feelings and actions during their play, with the researcher

[14] Centre for Digital Scholarship, 'RDM Checklist', Leiden University Library, accessed 10 June 2025, https://www.library.universiteitleiden.nl/researchers/data-management/rdm-checklist.
[15] To avoid any issues this was my personal phone, on which all the games had been installed previously.

probing them as necessary.[16] When explaining this method to my interviewees many quickly understood; comparing it to the interactions they would have playing games together with friends watching them and/or livestreaming, which some of them had also previously done. Stimulated Recall adds to this by using post-participation interviews in which the participant is asked to recall their thoughts based on recordings of their participation to gain deeper and more reflective insights which may be lost in the moment during play.[17] When time was available after the play sessions, I would rewatch parts of the recordings together with my interviewees and probe them on specific actions – such as their choice to pick a specific character, or their audible reaction to an event happening in the game.

Conducting the play sessions directly after the structured interviews unfortunately limited the insights gained, as we often had to cut them short or skip parts of my intended materials due to time constraints. This was particularly notable for the Stimulated Recall, which ideally would have had some time between the initial action and the recall. A future project which plans around these issues in a more structured way could yield important insights for various interest groups, particularly given the lack of (African) player's voices in games research.

I sampled participants for these interviews by reaching out to potentially interested interlocutors I had previously met, messaging them directly through WhatsApp and Instagram. In these messages I reiterated the aims of my research, explained the intent of the interviews and play sessions, and invited them to participate. I offered both in-person and online as an option, noting my preference for in-person due to the play sessions. I offered to travel to any venue the interviewee preferred to conduct the interview at, offering the apartment I was staying at – placed relatively centrally in Accra and easy to access by both private transport and *trotro* bus – as an alternative. In order to avoid excluding participants on socio-economic status, the message explicitly mentioned that I would cover the interviewee's travel costs to and from the location. Despite my offer to travel, all interviews were held at my apartment.

2.3 Positionality

Given the ethnographic nature of my research, I hope to actively highlight my positionality here and throughout my thesis to reflect on how it affects my research. My research stay in Ghana was the first time I had entered the country, with no previous experience working or living in Ghana, or even first-hand familiarity with the country and the culture. As such, I was clearly conducting research from an outsider position. As a white European, this position was immediately visible to interlocutors and observers, who sometimes commented on this, wondering about my role and aims. At the same time, as a mid-20s, university-educated, and visibly masculine person I shared characteristics with many of my interlocutors, who considered me as a peer, likely enabling easier access and trust-building than an older and/or feminine-presenting researcher may have had.

My role as a (relatively wealthy) European researcher conducting (ethnographic) research in an underexplored discipline also raises questions regarding the often-noted relationship of knowledge extraction in which the researcher benefits from interlocutors' knowledge without offering anything in return,[18] particularly relevant in this case as this research was conducted as part of my Master's Degree and as such yields immediate (material) benefit to myself. Acknowledging these concerns, I deliberately choose to refer to my stay in Accra as a "research stay/period" rather than as a period of fieldwork. This

[16] Heather Desurvire and Magy Seif El-Nasr, 'Methods for Game User Research: Studying Player Behavior to Enhance Game Design', *IEEE Computer Graphics and Applications* 33, no. 4 (July 2013): 82–83, https://doi.org/10.1109/MCG.2013.61.
[17] Jori Pitkänen, 'Studying Thoughts: Stimulated Recall as a Game Research Method', in *Game Research Methods: An Overview*, ed. Petri Lankoski and Staffan Björk (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2015), 117.
[18] O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 68.

choice is based on discussions I was involved in during my time at the African Studies Centre Leiden with peer students and lecturers. These conversations regarded the (potentially) extractive and colonial nature of the concept of "the field"[19] and how the extraction of knowledge from research stays in Africa could be regarded as a continuation of colonial research and science in the service of imperialism. While simply changing the term I use does not alter my role in perpetuating this extractive process, I hope that by consciously drawing attention to it, I can inspire future researchers to consider their role in the extractive process and work towards a more equal and just academic structure. Furthermore, I hope that by including and highlighting my interlocutor's input and voices throughout my research process and this thesis, I am able to offer some of the "space to (re)make and define their world."[20]

Lastly, like most Game Studies researchers, I approach the hobby and subculture of digital games as a "fan-academic."[21] While I do not consider myself a "gamer," I actively play and design games of various sorts during my free time, and am involved in communities which make, discuss, and play them. I have a deep understanding of the culture and (subcultural) terminology of gaming, which allowed me to understand specific jargon and connect with my interlocutors in a somewhat immersed way. This included what Virgina Nightingale describes as being seen as "part of the process"[22] of justifying the hobby and countering stereotypes; something I also considered a personal goal of my project, albeit a secondary one. I noticed how some interlocutors, aware of my researcher status, considered me as a potential advocate for their efforts in attaining legitimacy and support due to the expertise I showed.

Somewhat related to my background as a fan-academic, I refer to a handful of popular games and concepts related to them throughout this thesis. These may not be familiar to all readers, particularly ones with limited or no gaming background themselves. Where they are not directly relevant to my arguments, I use text boxes which add a basic explanation and background to add context.

2.3.1 "Well Played" in What?: Reflecting on Learning and Playing Popular Games

As my research centres on the act of playing digital games and the communities that form around it, I naturally sought to participate in this gameplay as part of my ethnography. However, being "well played" (in the same way one can be "well read"[23]) did not necessarily make me an insider in gaming spaces or make the process of research-by-play notably easier. Rather, it presented unique and unexpected challenges which I hope to reflect upon here to highlight how my positionality shaped my research, and to hopefully inspire researchers who may face similar situations.

As I elaborate in chapter 5, by far the most popular game I encountered during my stay in Ghana was *EA Sports FC* (Electronic Arts, 2023-Present), the follow up to EA's popular *FIFA* (Electronic Arts, 1993-2022) series. While I am a casual football fan and as such could understand the themes and rules of the game, I had not interacted with the franchise in any way for over ten years, and did not have any proficiency with playing it. While I was aware of the popularity of EAFC, I underestimated the extent to which my

> ***EAFC***
>
> EA Sports FC (EAFC) is an association football simulation game in which the player takes control of a football team, manager, or player. I engage with the game in more detail in chapter 5.

[19] For a discussion of this, see Artwell Nhemachena, Nelson Mlambo, and Maria Kaundjua, 'The Notion of the "Field" and the Practices of Researching and Writing Africa: Towards Decolonial Praxis', *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 9, no. 7 (2016): 15–36.
[20] Nhemachena, Mlambo, and Kaundjua, 24.
[21] Virginia Nightingale, 'Why Observing Matters', in *Research Methods for Cultural Studies*, ed. Michael Pickering (Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 119–20, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748631193-008.
[22] Nightingale, 120.
[23] Drew Davidson, 'Well Played 2.0: More Perspectives on Video Games, Value and Meaning', in *Well Played 2.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning*, ed. Drew Davidson (ETC Press, 2010), 1.

lack of proficiency with it would affect my ethnography. I spent a significant amount of time at game centres and would often buy EAFC playtime, to pass the time, understand the process, and be a customer rather than just loitering around. Playing alone, this served as a good way to pass some time and learn the game. When playing against other people – a key part of Ghanaian games culture as I elaborate in chapter 5 – my lack of skill proved a problem. Players often approached me asking to play against them, as – in the words of one player – he had "never played against a white person before."[24] The competitive and skill-intensive nature of the game meant that, very quickly, it would become apparent that the game centre customers – who had regularly been playing games in the franchise for years – far outmatched me to the point where the game was not fun for either them or me. Given the cost of playtime, the novelty of playing against a European quickly wore off, and they would, understandably, rather play against somebody on their own level. Meanwhile, while I was prepared to struggle and considered this part of the research process, my inability to compete occasionally became frustrating, best summed up by one entry in my notebook:

"I lack the knowledge and skills to play FIFA, or Valorant, or PUBG [all competitive games]*, and so on, at the same level as the interlocutors. While I can keep some conversation and do not pretend to know more than I do, when it comes to actually playing this will be immediately noticeable, and it presents a bit of a barrier. Being in these spaces means that you have people observing your plays, and I feel like even more of an imposter when I sit there playing something at such a basic level."*[25]

Critically, I realised during my research stay, learning to play EAFC was not *fun;* it was work I was doing as part of my research. While I had my fun with the game at times, I struggled to reach Mihail Csikszentmihalyi's fabled flow state,[26] with the game rather feeling like a chore which I paid the costs of travel and playtime for. This led me to reflect further on how my own player skill and preferences affected my research. Espen Aarseth argues that understanding a game is often best achieved through proficient play.[27] This, I believe, extends to understanding a game's community, and it is likely I missed some nuance I had in conversations with my interlocutors due to my lack of EAFC proficiency. Notably, Jeffrey G. Snodgrass *et al.* and Ellen Busolo Milimu, whose work influences much of this thesis, both engage with game centres as outsiders: Snodgrass *et al.* note first having to find gaming centres which catered to their research interests.[28] Milimu focuses on questionnaires and interviews over observation.[29] Neither author mentions engaging in play at the centres themselves. While this can be explained by their specific research aims, Tom Boellstorff points out in his reply to Snodgrass *et al.* that this limits the range of insights gained, particularly concerning their participant-observation.[30] Given the lack of such first-hand experiences in prior research, I hope that despite my novice player status I was able to highlight and understand some previously underdiscussed nuances.

[24] Conversation with game centre customers, 10 October 2024.
[25] Notebook Entry, 26 September 2024
[26] The flow state is a common discussion point in games analysis and discussion, see John Hamon Salisbury and Penda Tomlinson, 'Reconciling Csikszentmihalyi's Broader Flow Theory: With Meaning and Value in Digital Games', *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 2, no. 2 (5 April 2016): 57–60, https://doi.org/10.26503/todigra.v2i2.34.
[27] Espen Aarseth, 'Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis', *Artnodes* 0, no. 7 (2007): 7, https://doi.org/10.7238/a.v0i7.763.
[28] Jeffrey G. Snodgrass et al., 'Indian Gaming Zones as Oppositional Subculture: A Norm Incongruity "Cultural Dissonance" Approach to Internet Gaming Pleasure and Distress', *Current Anthropology* 62, no. 6 (1 December 2021): 776, https://doi.org/10.1086/717769.
[29] Ellen Busolo Milimu, 'Playing Offside: An Intersectional Analysis of Sports in Kenya's Informal Sector' (PhD Thesis, Boston, University of Massachusetts, 2024), 116–17.
[30] Tom Boellstorff, 'Comments on Indian Gaming Zones as Oppositional Subculture', *Current Anthropology* 62, no. 6 (1 December 2021): 788–89, https://doi.org/10.1086/717769.

In contrast to my experience with EAFC, my experience with *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang* (Moontoon, 2016) highlights how my enjoyment and proficiency of the game yielded deeper insights. Throughout my stay, I attended a series of tournaments in which the game was played. I had been mostly unfamiliar with it beforehand, knowing of little beyond its existence and meteoric rise as an esport. To understand the tournaments and their players, I chose to try and learn to play MLBB. I quickly realised that, while I had started at a similar point of knowledge as with EAFC, my experience playing *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation, 2013) as a teenager meant I quickly grasped some of the game's more advanced systems which the two games share. Additionally, with MLBB's focus on strategy and understanding interacting systems, its gameplay was closer to the types of games I enjoy playing in my free time. As I kept playing the game quickly took over my waking hours, and within days I had memorised the game's 126 (at time of writing) characters, as well as their abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. While my proficiency did not approach that of the tournament participants who had played the game for much longer, a few weeks into the tournaments I was able to follow their strategies, gameplay choices, and discussions. The knowledge meant I did not feel like an outsider, both making me more confident in my interactions and allowing me to understand jargon-filled conversations regarding the game's current competitive balance and how it affected the tournaments I attended; brainstorming tactics and moves with players and spectators. I highlight this experience here to draw attention to a largely underdiscussed part of games research, and to further highlight how my own positionality shaped my experiences in Accra.

Mobile Legends: Bang Bang

Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (commonly abbreviated as MLBB) is a free-to-play MOBA action-strategy game developed for mobile phones in which two teams of five players compete to fight over a series of objectives. Players choose from a large roster of characters with unique abilities and roles, trying to build a well-functioning team, utilising teamwork, tactics, and knowledge of the game's mechanics. The game takes the MOBA genre's complicated and lengthy gameplay and adapts it to a shorter, simplified format suited for mobile.

The game enjoys significant popularity in Southeast Asia, with nearly half of all the region's players playing the game in 2020.[31] This popularity extends to esports, where it has become one of the most watched games globally,[32] which has attracted it attention beyond Southeast Asia, including in Africa.

[31] 'Gaming in Southeast Asia: The Playing, Spending & Viewing Behavior of a Fast-Growing Games Market', *Newzoo* (blog), 3 July 2020, https://newzoo.com/resources/blog/southeast-asia-games-market-esports-game-streaming-spending-playing-engagement.
[32] 'Esports Tournaments 2025: Most Watched Tournaments', *Discovery One* (blog), 16 April 2025, https://discoveryone.gg/esports-tournaments-2025-most-watched-tournaments-and-games-of-q1/.

3 “You Need to Talk about Inflation”: Material and Social Access to Gaming

At this point of the afternoon, tournament exhaustion was starting to kick in with me - there as the only observer - and the participants. I had noticed this at previous tournaments too. While I had it relatively easy, having only travelled for about 30 minutes and not having to play any games myself, the participants had in some cases travelled for multiple hours to attend this EAFC tournament, and had to play high-level games. The hours of playing and energetically cheering on their friends usually took their toll, and at some point, people's energy levels would drop. The constant sounds of whistles and crowd noises coming from each of the eight or so TVs set up in the small room combined with the in-person cheering and added to the overwhelming environment together with the room's lights. Some players had left the room, playing pool on the pool table set up on the porch, grabbing a bite from the stand across the street, or simply sitting in the sun. Given the temperature I opted to enjoy the air-conditioned room instead.

The organisers' announcement that the group stages were finished and we would now move onto the knockout stage returned some energy to the room. Some players got ready to play their own matches, while others set up to watch the marquee matchups on the separate screen - linked to a livestream - hanging above the other screens in the room. The games proceeded smoothly, albeit at a lower level of audience engagement, when, a minute or two into the first semi-final matchup, we encountered another situation that I had, at this point, become familiar with: one moment to the next, the various noises and lights disappeared, followed by a collective groan. The game centre hosting the tournament - as well as most of the neighbourhood - had fallen victim to what's locally referred to as "dumsor" or "lights out", the irregular (and thankfully often short) power outages plaguing Ghana. After the initial frustration, normalcy quickly returned, power outages were a normal element of esports tournaments after all: most tournaments I visited during my time in Ghana had at least one delay to wait for power to come back. John, a tournament organiser I met at a different event, noted that one of the big benefits of his tournament's venue was that there was a backup generator and thus they did not have to worry about power outages delaying or even prematurely ending the event.

When discussing my research topic with informants, their answers and suggestions quickly made it obvious that, in order to understand the context of digital game playing in Accra, I would have to understand the material factors which shaped their engagement with the medium. In this chapter, I explore why and how these material factors are key to the games culture of Accra. I hope to highlight the ways in which the digital materiality of gaming reflects Ghana’s position in the global financial system, global digital network, and global supply chains, and the tensions which this position creates. I draw on the concept of material and social access to analyse and highlight the ways in which players navigate the Ghanaian context. These players are located on the margins of the global digital and gaming ecosystems, where access to formal structures is limited and more complicated. This marginal position often leads to feelings of resignation and hopelessness. Furthermore, I argue that the specific interactions of Accra’s digital materiality add a dimension to explanations of why mobile games are the main way in which players across Africa play games.

I follow Indra de Lanerolle, Alette Schoon, and Marion Walton’s call to integrate (digital) infrastructure and digital materiality into African digital methods and (digital) media studies. They use the concept of digital materiality to refer to mobile communications users' navigation of factors which

define their access to mobile networks.[33] Beyond this, the concept has also been used, across various disciplines, to more generally refer to the interactions and processes between the digital and its tangible, material factors and production.[34] I use the concept to discuss the material, financial and social factors of living in Accra on their impact on players' access and engagement with digital media and digital games in particular. In this I acknowledge that material factors and digital access are fully intertwined and exist in a constant process of mutual (re)production

3.1 “I Don’t Play When It Rains Anymore:” Navigating Infrastructural Obstacles

The statement that “issues of infrastructure, distribution and repair should indeed be central to media studies on the African continent”[35] matches the experiences I made during my stay in Ghana. Gaming and games-related activities like esports and livestreaming are shaped in large parts by access to Accra’s infrastructure. The most visible infrastructural challenge to gaming were the power outages I described above, which players, tournament organisers, and I, had to deal with. Discussing the issues I faced during an online chat with one of my interlocutors, he mentioned that “I don’t play when it rains anymore,”[37] noting that the rain would regularly knock out power and his neighbourhood, so it was not worth the potential frustration. The unreliability of electricity systems has regularly been stressed as a key obstacle for game players and developers across Africa, with developers drawing attention to it in interviews and presentations.[38] The impact of regular power outages has also been linked to limiting the growth of media industries like gaming across the continent.[39] Anne-Marie Schleiner argues that having to deal with power outages is a key factor which separates the experience

Esports

Esports refers to competition between humans, often for monetary rewards, in digital games.[36] My use of the term throughout this thesis largely aligns with this definition. Notably however, the definition used by most of my informants appeared to be more inclusive. Particularly when discussing the potential benefits of esports and their future aspirations (discussed in chapters 5 and 6), the definition used by players and organisers seemed to also include non-competitive, recreational multiplayer play and in some cases even single-player play. I did not investigate this difference in definition further during my stay as I only noticed it upon reviewing my data, however it may be interesting to do so in a future project and look at how players and organisers (in Ghana and elsewhere) define and demarcate their activities. Beyond the activity of playing itself, I include ancillary activities like tournament organising, livestreaming, commentating, coaching and similar activities in my definition and analysis, as each of these activities is key to the overall esports ecosystem in Accra as well as globally.

[33] Indra De Lanerolle, Alette Schoon, and Marion Walton, ‘Researching Mobile Phones in the Everyday Life of the “Less Connected”: The Development of a New Diary Method’, *African Journalism Studies* 41, no. 4 (1 October 2020): 38–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2020.1813785.

[34] Sarah Pink, Elisenda Ardèvol Piera, and Débora Lanzeni, ‘Digital Materiality’, in *Digital Materialities: Design and Anthropology*, by Sarah Pink, Elisenda Ardèvol Piera, and Débora Lanzeni (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 6–10.

[35] Alette Schoon et al., ‘Decolonising Digital Media Research Methods: Positioning African Digital Experiences as Epistemic Sites of Knowledge Production’, *African Journalism Studies* 41, no. 4 (1 October 2020): 5, https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2020.1865645 for an in-depth discussion of infrastructure’s role in African media, see; Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822389316.

[36] Nepomuk Nothelfer, Seth E. Jenny, and Nicolas Besombes, ‘Defining and Spelling Esports’, in *Routledge Handbook of Esports*, ed. Seth E. Jenny et al. (London: Routledge, 2024), 11, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003410591.

[37] Kax, Online communication, October 2024.

[38] Heenali Patel, ‘Finally, a Video Game Hero for Africa’, CNN, 20 January 2016, https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/20/africa/cameroon-video-game-fantasy-aurion.

[39] Fackson Banda, Okoth Fred Mudhai, and Wisdom J. Tettey, ‘Introduction: New Media and Democracy in Africa - A Critical Interjection’, in *African Media and the Digital Public Sphere*, ed. Okoth Fred Mudhai, Wisdom J. Tettey, and Fackson Banda (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 9.

of gaming in the Global South from that of players in the Global North.[40]

Beyond shutting down the console or PC and frustrating players that way, my interviews and my own playing – both for research and for leisure – highlighted a further issue with power outages. The immediate shutdown meant that often a notable amount of progress since the last save would be lost. While this is frustrating for singleplayer games, multiplayer games would often treat these disconnections as the player abandoning the game. To promote good conduct, many multiplayer games rank a player's behaviour. Bad behaviour like insulting other players and, critically, leaving games in progress, is punished through being matched up against players judged to be behaving similarly bad or even through being (temporarily) locked out of playing the game. Beyond the direct punishment, this would also lead to players being branded as unreliable or toxic by the games through no fault of their own, using the language of moral judgements. This not only adds insult to injury, but further discourages players, as even with good behaviour all it would take to be considered a mal-adjusted and bad teammate was bad luck with that day’s electricity supply. Notably, mobile games and their players are protected from this as they do not rely on a constant electricity source, which may be another factor which helps explain their popularity.

While the frustration with matchmaking systems and punishments for power outages was notable, I only encountered it a handful of times, as only a few of the people I talked to regularly played multiplayer games online on consoles or PC. This type of online play drains large amounts of data. While this is not usually an issue in Global North settings, where most people access the internet through an unlimited broadband connection, such connections are rare in Ghana.[41] Rather, I and most of my interlocutors used metered, pre-paid connections whether on mobile or accessing the internet through a wi-fi router. As such, for most players, every minute spent online would cost additional money. This combines with the monthly subscription required to even access online play on PlayStation - by far the most popular non-mobile system - to place online play firmly outside most people's economic capacities.

These internet connections, while expensive, are generally fast and steady. However, this does little to counteract latency, the time needed to send and return data from the host server. With action-focused games like the popular EAFC and *Mortal Kombat* (NetherRealm Studios, 1992-Present) low latency is vital to reacting to an opponent in time during competitive play. As such, even when working around all other issues, Ghanaian players are at an inherent disadvantage to those living closer to data centres located primarily in Europe, North America, and Asia.

Latency

Latency (often “ping”) is a measure of the time it takes for data to travel from a device to a host destination and back. It is largely dependent on geographic distance and the infrastructure of the global undersea cable network. High latency means that inputs register with a delay, or not at all, making it difficult to play properly.

When discussing latency and online play with my interlocutors, many mentioned *Call of Duty: Mobile* (TiMi Studio Group, 2019), where the Nigerian scene had successfully lobbied publisher Activision to set up a West African server, and which as such was playable with notably less latency than most other games.[42] Discussing this with an acquaintance who works in server hosting for games

[40] Anne-Marie Schleiner, *Transnational Play: Piracy, Urban Art, and Mobile Games* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 48, https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463728904.
[41] International Telecommunication Union, ‘Ghana Data’, ITU Data Hub, 13 May 2025, https://data-hub.itu.int/data/?e=GHA.
[42] Bolu Abiodun, ‘Call of Duty: Mobile Launches Dedicated Nigerian Server’, Techpoint.Africa, 5 December 2023, https://techpoint.africa/news/call-of-duty-mobile-nigerian-server/.

companies, he mentioned how his company had previously planned to establish servers in West and Southern Africa. However, the financial challenges of the post-Covid years, limited demand, and the complex business environment in many African countries had led to these plans being paused for the foreseeable future.

While an unavoidable disadvantage in online games is a comparatively benign issue created by the global-north centred structure of the internet, it highlights the importance and wide range of increasingly pressing conversations regarding the exploitative nature of this structure, which Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias describe as "a new form of colonialism distinctive of the twenty-first century: data colonialism"[43] While they primarily discuss this through the extractive nature of Big Data in which everyday interactions are appropriated for the generation of profit, issues like latency highlight how the long-term consequences of (historical) colonialism carrying over into the digital world and its interactions.[44]

3.2 “I used to Only Play at Midnight for the Midnight Bundles:” Financial Challenges

Introducing myself and my project at the events I attended, the first response I received often was very similar. After some confused amusement about the research value of my topic, the first answer would generally be “You need to talk about inflation.” The ubiquity of inflation in conversations was not limited to games. With annual inflation rates of 20 to 50% over the previous three years,[45] the effects of inflation were visible every day and a common topic of conversation throughout Ghanaian society. Nevertheless, the regularity and intensity with which interlocutors brought up inflation as a key factor of their gaming experience was notable and surprising. As I explored this it became clear that this concern with inflation resulted directly from the ways the Ghanaian gaming ecosystem is structured and integrated into the global games ecosystem, which I hope to argue here.

With the advent of digital storefronts – in the Ghanaian context primarily Steam (PC), the PlayStation Network (PlayStation) Google Play (Android), and the App Store (iPhone) – most games are no longer sold as physical goods, but as purely digital ones. They are bought online through a digital transaction and then downloaded and installed without any CD, cartridge, or other tangible medium. This digitisation of storefronts has fundamentally altered access to games, significantly reducing publishers’ overhead costs and logistical issues like transport and storage. This is particularly relevant outside the global centres of gaming which were and remain outside most publishers' physical distribution networks. As quantity is no longer limited by (physical) transport logistics, this makes it significantly easier and more convenient to access games, with a much larger range of available options than in the days of physical products. In the Ghanaian case, the move to digital goods has however presented a new challenge: as games’ file size can grow quite large (the most recent iteration of EAFC on PlayStation requires a 53 Gigabyte download), downloading them usually requires the purchase of additional data bundles. At time of writing, the bundle required for a download of that size would cost roughly 300 cedis.[46] These costs further increase mobile games attractiveness, as they rarely exceed a few Gigabytes in size. Some of my respondents mentioned the existence of midnight bundles, offers in which data

[43] Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias, ‘Data Colonialism: Rethinking Big Data’s Relation to the Contemporary Subject’, *Television & New Media* 20, no. 4 (May 2019): 337, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476418796632.
[44] An in-depth discussion of the (neo-)colonial nature of social media and offerings like Facebook’s free data packages is beyond the scope of this thesis.
[45] ‘Ghana Inflation Rate’, Trading Economics, accessed 1 April 2025, https://tradingeconomics.com/ghana/inflation-cpi.
[46] Highlighting the unstable exchange rate, this is equivalent to about 25 Euros in June 2025, and about 18 Euros during my stay in Accra in Autumn of 2024.

providers offer significantly reduced costs during low traffic periods (usually after midnight, therefore the name).

The larger range of available games also includes free-to-play games, opening the medium to those unable to pay for games, although internet costs remain an excluding factor. As J.J., one of my interlocutors, described, it also made it much easier to learn about games one had previously not heard of, and critically, made it possible to play those games with much less effort. He noted how previously, when one wanted to play a non-mainstream game, it usually required the services of a "plug" who would track down and import a copy in return for payment, thereby adding more costs and making these games even more difficult to access for most people.

However, despite these potential benefits, storefront digitisation's effects on the Ghanaian context have been limited by the structure of these storefronts and of international financial systems. As of 2024, PlayStation Store and Network (PSN), the PlayStation's storefront, are only available in 76 countries - South Africa being the only country in Africa with PSN access.[47] While it is technically possible (although against the store's Terms of Service) to use a VPN to create an account in an available country, in order to purchase anything one would require a valid payment option - usually credit card - from said country. This further limits this option to those who have friends and family abroad whose payment information they can use.[48] As these purchases will be in the respective country's currency (or US$), the cost is directly tied to the cedi's exchange rate and adjusted to another country's purchasing power, which leads to massive increases in the (relative) cost of PlayStation games for consumers. Given the PlayStation's popularity as by far the most common console in Ghana, this places most console games outside of Ghanaian players' access both financially and infrastructurally.

Some interlocutors additionally mentioned payment options as a key factor limiting their access to games on PC. They noted how most international digital purchases require a credit card, which remain exceedingly rare and difficult to qualify for in Ghana.[49] This further complicates the process of making international digital purchases, even when not faced with explicit geographical exclusion like with the PSN. In contrast to this, Apple's various storefronts,[50] as well as the Android’s Google Play,[51] are fully available in Ghana, supporting payment in cedis and through widespread local payment systems like MTN Mobile Money and Vodafone Cash. However, as prices are not always regionally adjusted and instead linked to their price in US$, inflation remains an issue. My interlocutor Bryan pointed out how a battle pass (a regular subscription payment for additional in-game benefits) which had cost him around 60 cedis a month pre-Covid would now cost him 400 cedis a month for the same benefits; the cost increase being entirely due to inflation according to him.

[47] ‘PlayStation Country Selector’, PlayStation, 14 June 2021, https://www.playstation.com/country-selector/index.html issues of global PSN accessibility received significant attention and led to outrage when Helldivers 2 introduced mandatory account linking, see; murten101, ‘I Made a Map That Shows What Countries Can Make a PSN Account.’, Reddit Post, *R/Helldivers*, 3 May 2024, www.reddit.com/r/Helldivers/comments/1cj4yhz/i_made_a_map_that_shows_what_countries_can_make_a/.

[48] This likely also explains the install services offered by some Ghanaian games stores. Akin to the plugs mentioned above, a store or individual gets paid to handle the process of installing a specific game and getting it to work, skipping the need for players to figure out the process of navigating VPNs and foreign payment systems.

[49] Fred Avornyo, ‘Ghana Had Only 68k Credit Cards by End of December’, The High Street Journal, 16 February 2025, https://thehighstreetjournal.com/ghana-had-only-68k-credit-cards-by-end-of-december/.

[50] Apple Support, ‘Availability of Apple Media Services’, Apple Support, 26 September 2024, https://support.apple.com/en-us/118205.

[51] Google Play Help, ‘Paid App Availability’, Google Play Help, accessed 22 June 2025, https://support.google.com/googleplay/answer/143779.

3.3 “A Lot of People See Downloading as the Cost of the Game Anyways:” Software Piracy through an Access Lens

Akin to most of the Global South,[52] software piracy is widespread in Ghana. During my stay, players would regularly ask their friends for assistance in finding or downloading copies of recent games and other media online and share these files among each-other. While my interlocutors were aware of the legal issues around piracy,[53] they acknowledged that most players regularly acquired pirated games, and discussed their own experiences and methods openly. Downloading pirated copies allowed players who had their own devices (and enough income to pay for the data costs of downloading the games) to play recent releases without having to also pay for the games themselves. As new games' price can approach multiple weeks' wage, these copies enable players to experience new games without significant investment.

As Penix-Tadsen points out, software piracy nurtures and democratizes media literacy and access.[54] This was apparent in some discussions with interlocutors, where they drew attention to the skills required to pirate games. On PC, and particularly on consoles which run on proprietary software, safely and effectively finding and installing pirated copies required an understanding of file structures, digital architecture, and cybersecurity. These skills, often self-taught and picked up from friends, had inspired some of the people I talked to exploring formal IT education, directly contributing to their current education and employment situations.

Discussing the prevalence of piracy across the gaming sector, Gabe Newell, co-founder of Valve Corporation (the company behind the biggest PC gaming storefront Steam) famously argued that “piracy is not a pricing issue. It’s a service issue.”[55] Using the example of Russia – considered a hotbed of software piracy – he noted how rather than increasing anti-piracy precautions, the company worked to localize products and offered elastic pricing. Steam offers publishers pricing guidelines adjusted to currency strength and national purchasing power.[56] These guidelines however do not include most African countries, which thus draw on default pricing in US$. As one of my interlocutors pointed out, this meant that prices were tied to the Cedi-Dollar exchange rate and could shift rapidly, which made planning to buy games unpredictable. As such, while the pricing was an issue, it also was in large part a service issue, with neither Steam or publishers caring enough to set locally adjusted prices.

Schleiner notes that many Global South players discussing piracy online follow Newell's line of argument, noting that piracy, while not ethically fair, was the only way to feasibly access games in their socioeconomic contexts.[57] Conversely, some of my respondents were less concerned about ethics, arguing that "everyone is selling everything now, so why not pirate things"[58] and justifying their piracy as a reaction to the increased monetization of games through paid downloadable content (DLC) and micro-transactions making it increasingly difficult even for paying players to access the entirety of a game's content. These particular frustrations with the financial side of the (mainstream) games industry

[52] Phillip Penix-Tadsen, ed., ‘Introduction: Video Games and the Global South’, in *Video Games and the Global South* (Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon University, ETC Press, 2019), 15.
[53] I do not refer to any names or pseudonyms in this section as a safety and ethics precaution.
[54] Penix-Tadsen, ‘Introduction: Video Games and the Global South’, 15–17.
[55] Todd Bishop, ‘How Valve Experiments with the Economics of Video Games’, *GeekWire* (blog), 23 October 2011, https://www.geekwire.com/2011/experiments-video-game-economics-valves-gabe-newell/.
[56] ‘Pricing’, Steamworks Documentation, accessed 15 May 2025, https://partner.steamgames.com/doc/store/pricing.
[57] Schleiner, *Transnational Play*, 61.
[58] Personal conversation, September 2024.

may hint towards interactions with internet gamer culture by these interlocutors, where these concerns are regularly discussed using similar narratives to what I encountered during my time in Accra.

While not averse to piracy, some of the professionals I talked with were more concerned with its effects. As one developer noted while discussing the challenges Ghanaian developers have with reaching a local audience (discussed in more detail in chapter 4): “If people don't get into the habit of paying for games, we can't expect players to buy the games we make.”[59] One of my interlocutors pointed out how many of his friends considered paying for the (often significant) data cost of downloading a game as "good enough,"[60] choosing to not pay for the game itself. Savita Bailur, Emrys Schoemaker and Jonathan Donner discuss this phenomenon as a "blurred understandings of what developing country mobile internet users feel they are paying for."[61] They, perhaps somewhat patronisingly, suggest that users are confused by having to pay for data and content separately and conflate the two. They argue that users are unwilling to pay as they feel they already did so. This leads to a picture of confused Africans who do not understand how the internet they use works, which does not correspond with my experiences. While it is possible that users' understanding changed in the nearly ten years since Bailur, Schoemaker, and Donner's research, the players I talked to (and their friends) seemed to be, for the most part, aware of the difference between paying for data and paying for the game, knowingly choosing to only pay for the download. Rather than from confusion or misunderstanding, their decision to engage in piracy came from the high cost, difficulty in accessing games, or discontent with the games industry's monetization practices.

3.4: “We’re more than just truants:” Stigmatisation and Social Access

Social stigma, particularly originating from one’s parents, was a common point raised when discussing the barriers to engaging with games. It came up in personal discussions with my interlocutors, as well as talks and presentations I attended in person and digitally. Many parents, my interlocutors lamented, considered games as addictive, childish, and wastes of time and money. Eric, an esports organiser, further pointed out how many parents conflated digital games with gambling - commonly referred to as "Gaming" in Ghana. Many interlocutors described how, as a child or teenager, gaming was something that had done hidden from their parents, such as J.J. who would tell his parents he would visit some friends after school and then would instead go to a local game centre. This would at times create tensions between the game centres and the parents, which I elaborate on in chapter 5. Interestingly, while these tensions exist, playing games is still seen as preferential to wasting time away in bars with bad people; with particularly smaller game centres becoming community spaces where customers, employees, and parents all know each other. As Arthur described, "in the past, if you were a parent looking for your kid and they weren't playing football you'd probably find them at the neighbourhood game centre."[62]

The view of gaming as transgressive and a waste of time is by no means unique to Ghana. As Faltin Karlsen highlights, digital games have been the subject of moral and media panics for as long as they have existed.[63] This general, global concern about games as harmful and immoral collides with the

[59] Personal conversation, October 2024.
[60] Personal conversation, December 2024.
[61] Savita Bailur, Emrys Schoemaker, and Jonathan Donner, ‘Paying for Access or Content? Blurred Understandings of Mobile Internet Data in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda’, in *GlobDev 2016* (GlobDev 2016, Dublin, Ireland, 2016).
[62] Arthur, personal conversation, 17 September 2024.
[63] Faltin Karlsen, ‘Analyzing Game Controversies: A Historical Approach to Moral Panics and Digital Games’, in *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, ed. Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth, and Ashley M. L. Brown (New York: Routledge, 2015), 15–16.

role of “makers and breakers” young people hold in African societies,[64] which has been reinforced by the growing access to ICT (including games) over the past 20 years.[65] In the Ghanaian context, outsiders (primarily parents)’s main concern appears to be that the addictive nature of games will make young people forgo their education and work to play more, thereby failing to become productive members and “makers” of society and instead breaking with the conventions of what it means to be an adult. Here the perception of gaming as childish likely plays a role too.

On a more international scale, some experienced esports organisers mentioned to me how they often felt like they were treated as a bit of a curiosity, rather than as legitimate competitors, at international tournaments. African organisations and athletes, they argued, were instrumentalised and not taken entirely seriously by organisers. The recent change of the "Afro-Arab Esports League" to the "Arab Esports League" was particularly symbolic of this for the Ghanaian esports organisers. The League had been established as part of the Saudi Arabian government-supported Gamers8 event in 2023 to much fanfare.[66] However, my respondents lamented, as soon as the event had gained some traction, the "African" part was struck out of the name.[67] This frustration with the (supposed) change points towards a feeling of receiving unequal treatment. Xhaq and his brother raised a similar point during our interview. They noted how both of them had been involved in a competitive Call of Duty: Mobile clan during the COVID pandemic, which brought together some 200 players from all over Ghana. The best players of this team would regularly match up in international play against other countries, particularly against their Nigerian counterparts with whom they developed an intense rivalry which also spilled over to the fan community. All this had been in preparation for the CoD:M World Championship, with both fans and players enthused by the potential of playing on a global stage. They described how the community was devastated when it was announced that there were no African qualifiers and as such none of them would be able to even attempt to qualify for the Championship; very quickly all the enthusiasm died down and most of the fans and players moved on. This reaction was not primarily about the lack of qualifying spots, but rather frustration with the ways Africa was ignored and not taken seriously by the organisations and developers in the rest of the world.[69]

Call of Duty: Mobile

Call of Duty: Mobile (CoD:M) is a free-to-play first-person shooter developed for mobile phones. Part of the widely popular *Call of Duty* franchise, it offers a variety of game modes in which players compete against one-another in realistic, modern military settings. Game modes centre around achieving objectives or achieving the highest number of kills. It is one of the most popular mobile games globally, having been downloaded over one billion times.[68]

[64] Alcinda Manuel Honwana and Filip de Boeck, ‘Introduction: Children & Youth in Africa: Agency, Identity & Place’, in *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*, ed. Alcinda Manuel Honwana and Filip de Boeck, 1. publ (Oxford: James Currey, 2005), 2–3.

[65] Mirjam De Bruijn and Jonna Both, ‘Youth Between State and Rebel (Dis)Orders: Contesting Legitimacy from Below in Sub-Sahara Africa’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28, no. 4–5 (3 September 2017): 781, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2017.1322329.

[66] Ivan Šimić, ‘Afro-Arab Esports League Launched in Riyadh’, *Esports Insider* (blog), 21 August 2023, https://esportsinsider.com/2023/08/afro-arab-esports-league-riyadh.

[67] I could not find confirmation of this, as the rebranding of Gamers8 to the Esports World Cup in 2024 and the sparsely connected esports news platforms complicate the search, however the voicing of the frustration is relevant no matter the exact proceedings.

[68] Call of Duty Staff, ‘Meet Your Fate in Call of Duty: Mobile Season 10 — 5th Anniversary!’, Call of Duty, 4 November 2024, https://www.callofduty.com/blog/2024/11/call-of-duty-mobile-season-10-fifth-anniversary-celebration-announcement.

[69] An African qualifier is being hosted for the first time in 2025, offering a $15,000 prize pool and a spot at the CoD:M World Championship, see Jonno Nicholson, ‘Carry1st to Host African Qualifiers for COD: Mobile World Championship’, *Esports Insider* (blog), 3 May 2025, https://esportsinsider.com/2025/05/carry1st-african-cod-mobile-world-championship-qualifier.

Discussing the marginalisation, ignorance, exploitation, and exoticisation Africans have been (and continue to be) subjected to on a global scale goes far beyond the scale of this (and likely *any* single) thesis. The frustrations I describe here can easily be read as a response to this. Narrowing to the digital world, Jenna Burrell describes how, as a response to widespread *sakawa*/419 scams originating from West Africa throughout the 2000s, various (Western) websites blocked online traffic from the region with little concern or reflection on how this affected people living there. As one blogger pointed out, this inaccessibility highlighted Ghana’s marginal role in the modern world, by excluding its internet users largely as an afterthought.[70]

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed the social and material factors which shape the ways players do (and do not) engage with games in Accra. Power outages and expensive, pre-paid internet connections, and a high rate of inflation not only complicate initial access to games, but also make playing them frustrating and unpredictable, particularly online. Ghanaian players face unavoidable hurdles, such as unresponsive controls and the risk of punishment for bad behaviour, because of Ghana’s position on the margins of the global digital network. Because of this position, it is also effectively impossible to access many of the storefronts where games are sold legally, and where access is possible players face globally set prices which do not account for the socio-economic situation in Ghana. The material aspect of this, as well as the feeling of discontent with the global gaming industry as a whole, and its ignorance of Africa specifically, leads to most players acquiring games through software piracy. This feeling of discontent is also visible in frustrations my interlocutors voiced about Africa in esports, where they felt ignored and instrumentalised, rather than treated as legitimate competitors.

Additionally, as I have highlighted throughout, these factors help explain the dominance of mobile games across Africa. While their popularity is generally linked to their lower cost and the ubiquity of phone ownership, it is likely that the factors I described here – such as being usable without a stable electricity source and overall smaller file sizes (which cost less to download) – play a significant role. Most importantly, unlike storefronts on PC and console, mobile gaming storefronts offer payment methods which can be used by most Ghanaians. This is particularly relevant as the limited existing data on (mobile) gaming across Africa relies primarily on consumer spending figures.[71] Combined with the frequency of piracy, and non-networked forms of play like game centres (discussed in chapter 5), it is unclear to what extent consumer spending can be read to indicate popularity in the Ghanaian (and other African) contexts. Rather, vast majority of consumer spending being on mobile games may rather indicate the (in)accessibility of different platforms' storefronts. With this I do not mean to claim that mobile gaming is not the most popular form of gaming in Ghana (as it is worldwide), rather that the numbers and their analysis do not cover the extent of gaming experiences.

[70] Jenna Burrell, *Invisible Users: Youth in the Internet Cafes of Urban Ghana*, Acting with Technology (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2012), 192–95.
[71] Carry1st, ‘African Gaming Market Defies’.

4 “A Prophet is not known in his Home:” African-developed Games and their Reception among Accra’s Players

In between matches and announcements, the competitors of this Mortal Kombat tournament were happy to discuss their taste in games. With a slightly different crowd than the EAFC tournaments I usually went to, I expected to hear some interesting answers. While they listed a variety of popular games, they – as I had expected – did not list a single game produced in Africa, something I brought to their attention. The reaction, while not unexpected, was more forceful than I had assumed: one of them described that most African games “kind of suck,” a sentiment most of his peers echoed. Given that a game developer I had talked to some time earlier had mentioned something similar about the games he and his peers developed, it was perhaps not shocking, but still unexpected. It highlighted the issue many game developers had mentioned: they could not get players to engage with their games. When I probed the players some more on this stance, and, critically, discussed and showed some of the games I was using for my research, their sentiment shifted.

Actually playing these games highlighted that (some of) the games were well-designed and had an interesting gameplay flow – far from the boring educational games many players in Ghana associated locally developed games with. They were eager to pass around my phone and try the games themselves, with a few making notes so they could track them down later.

Talking with game developers in Accra, many of them mentioned that they struggled to reach local players. Eyram Tawia, the founder of Accra-based game developers Leti Arts described the situation as “A Prophet is not known in his Home”[72] during a presentation he gave at the Ghana Digital & Innovation Week conference I attended. This presented me with an interesting opportunity to analyse this issue, as I spent a lot of time talking to said local players and was planning to conduct play sessions with them. Originally, I had intended for these sessions to discuss the representation of Africa in mainstream, (usually Western) games. This would allow me to contribute the voices and perspectives of the people being represented - something that remains largely absent from such analyses. For this I had prepared a collection of videos (as most games are on consoles) which I had originally intended to show to interviewees and discuss with them following the Thinking Aloud method outlined in my methodology. While I still showed these videos to interviewees when there was enough time (and discuss my findings below), the focus of my interviews shifted towards analysing games developed by African developers and how players reacted to them. As such, this chapter focuses on why players do (not) engage with African-developed games, the themes and contents of those games, and how those games, their production, and players’ (lack of) engagement with them reflect Ghana and Africa’s role in the (digital) world, imaginaries and representations thereof, and the tensions which arise from those, often mismatched, circumstances.

[72] Eyram Tawia et al., ‘The Impact of Esports and Game Development under STEAM Education’ (Ghana Digital & Innovation Week, Accra, 3 October 2024).

4.1 “We are not the Only Place with Civil Wars, so why has it always got to be Us?:” Reactions to African Elements in Mainstream Games

As mentioned, following my structured interviews with some interlocutors, I let them react to a series of videos which covered scenes from mainstream games which have previously been discussed for their representation of Africa. The first of these videos was the opening scene of *Far Cry 2* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2008). Jorge Albor describes the game, and particularly its opening scene, as "a modern day reimagining of Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness."[73] Set in a nameless African country, the game casts the player as a foreign mercenary involved in a civil war between different political factions drawing on the imagery of real-life African (para)militaries and their leaders. Drawing on Chinua Achebe's work on Heart of Darkness, Albor notes how Far Cry 2 displays a version of Africa "in which violence exists as an inseparable part of the landscape and its inhabitants, an all too common myth with real world implications."[74] In our interview, Sage noted how many aspects of the opening felt accurate to the African experience, but, referring to the game's overarching narrative, lamented that "We are not the only place with civil wars, so why has it always got to be us?"[75] He enjoyed the presence of recognizable and well-represented African elements in a widely played Western game but felt that these were still often limited to the image of Africa as inherently wild and violent.

Far Cry 2

In first-person shooter Far Cry 2, the player takes the role of a mercenary, tasked with killing a weapons dealer who is inflaming a civil war in a fictional, unspecified African country. The player has access to a wide selection of modern weaponry with which to fight human enemies and the environment, in the shape of malaria and hostile animals, across a world made up of savannahs, deserts, jungles, and towns.

A second video, included both the opening of *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom, 2009), as well as its much-discussed marshlands zombies section (see figure 2), in which the player fights through villages filled with "all of the clichés of the faceless generalised Africa.”[76] Despite the strong reactions the game has received in academic circles, my interlocutors did not feel particularly strongly about it: a White American man shooting zombies was part of the gameplay, and a common action game/movie element, so why did one have to read into it further or consider it a bad representation of Africa? Here there is a visible disconnect between (academic) postcolonial analyses and the everyday lived experience of consumers in Africa. As some interlocutors argued, common action movie tropes were just that, and not reflective of stereotypes or negative representations of Africa abroad.

Resident Evil 5

In the fifth entry of long-running action-horror series Resident Evil, the player, an agent of a global anti-bioterrorism organisation, is tasked with tracking down a bioterrorist in the fictional West African country of Kijuju. Upon arrival in the country, the characters learn that the locals have been infected by an engineered parasite which is turning them into mindless, aggressive zombies. Taking inspiration from action movies, the game features a large selection of weapons with which the player fights zombies, monsters, and other opponents.

[73] Jorge Albor, ‘Lions & Jackals: The Politics of Far Cry 2’, in *Well Played 2.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning*, ed. Drew Davidson (ETC Press, 2010), 201.
[74] Albor, 204.
[75] Sage, Interview, 1 December 2024.
[76] Hanli Geyser and Pippa Tshabalala, ‘Return to Darkness: Representations of Africa in Resident Evil 5’, in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2011 Conference: Think Design Play* (Tampere: DiGRA, 2011), https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/565, see also; Sabine Harrer and Martin Pichlmair, ‘Black Skin White Guns - Becoming Colonizer in Resident Evil 5’, in *The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference* (The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference, Berlin, 2015); Paul Martin, ‘Race, Colonial History and National Identity: *Resident Evil 5* as a Japanese Game’, *Games and Culture* 13, no. 6 (September 2018): 568–86, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016631648.

The final video included a handful of scenes and voice lines of *Valorant* (Riot Games, 2020) character Astra, who is Ghanaian and was designed in parts by Accra-based Leti Arts. Noting Valorant's reach as one of the most-played games globally,[77] Eyram Tawia described Astra as potentially “the biggest Ambassador of Ghana globally”[78] during a presentation. Most interlocutors were familiar with Astra’s character, and many had played a bit of Valorant, although opinions on the character were divided. Some of my interviewees argued that Astra's voice-lines and accent felt staged and not "authentically Ghanaian," while Acinelle mentioned that when she and some friends played online and used voice-chat, teammates would sometimes ask her friend if she was Astra's voice actress due to her accent. According to her opinion, the representation was well-done and felt fitting. Unlike the generalised African settings discussed above, Astra is explicitly Ghanaian, which led to concerns about authenticity and representation not notably present with the other games. The claim to be specifically Ghanaian led to my interlocutors questioning and critiquing the character much more attentively and critically, suggesting interest and concern in how her representation spoke to the image of Ghana among players globally.

Figure 2: Fighting marshlands zombies in Resident Evil 5, Screenshot taken from CrypnKnight.[79]

While I did not explicitly target it, another representation which regularly came up was that in EAFC, again linked to the game's widespread popularity. Throughout the many hours I spent observing and playing the game, I had never encountered anybody playing as the Black Stars, Ghana's national team.[80] When bringing this up, multiple respondents pointed out that the current team was widely unpopular due to its lack of success, culminating in the team failing to qualify for the Africa Cup of Nations for the first time in 20 years.[81] Instead, players chose to play teams which were successful (Real Madrid,

[77] Newzoo, ‘Most Popular PC Games by Monthly Active Users (MAU) – 37 Markets’, Newzoo, accessed 2 May 2025, https://newzoo.com/resources/rankings/top-20-pc-games.
[78] Eyram Tawia, ‘Harnessing the Entrepreneurial Potential of Creatives’ (Panel Discussion, The Creative Entrepreneurs Forum, Accra, 6 September 2024).
[79] CryptnKnight, ‘Resident Evil 5 - Chapter 3-1 - Marshlands 2/2 - Walkthrough Part 10’, YouTube, 22 January 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ku_uFP-N-z8.
[80] Notably Ghana is one of only two African national teams (together with Morocco) currently included in the EAFC franchise, while the less popular eFootball includes various (unlicensed) national teams from across the continent.
[81] ‘Heartbreak for Ghana as Black Stars Miss TotalEnergies CAF AFCON after 20 Years, Comoros Qualify’, CAF Online, 15 November 2024, https://www.cafonline.com/caf-africa-cup-of-nations/news/heartbreak-for-ghana-as-black-stars-miss-totalenergies-caf-afcon-after-20-years-comoros-qualify/.

Manchester City), whose tactics they felt fit their playstyle (Germany, France), or teams where they liked a specific player (Norway for Erling Haaland, Al-Nassr for Cristiano Ronaldo). When the Black Stars had been more popular however, my interlocutor Xhaq noted, their inclusion in games had been a notable selling point. He described how game centres would modify their games to include the team and then use this as a marketing point. This mirrors the ways Brazilian players and game centres engaged in game modification to customize the *Pro Evolution Soccer* (Konami, 1995-2020) (abbreviated as PES, now eFootball) series to incorporate local teams to attract players. As José Messias, Diego Amaral, and Thaiane Oliveira elaborate, beyond localizing the material this sort of modding can also be read as a counterhegemonic challenge to the standards and choices of the global games industry and as a way of accessing gaming while in a precarious socioeconomic situation.[82] Correspondingly, as Xhaq pointed out, when the Ghanaian team was officially added to the PES series,[83] it was “a big deal.”[84] Here, Ghana had attracted enough international attention to be included in something produced by the industry rather than local game modifiers. Akin to the character of Astra, the inclusion of specifically Ghanaian elements was notable and showed that the game’s developers recognised and acknowledged Ghana’s position in the world. Rather than on the margins of the game industry and included only through the (counterhegemonic) efforts of hobbyists, the Black Stars had earned a spot inside the global mainstream and were treated as equals of other national teams.

4.2 “We make Games about Malaria to Afford Making the Fun Fames we Want to Make”: Serious, Educational, and Developmental Games

In this and the following sections, I briefly discuss and analyse common themes in African-developed games. I engage in this analysis to help explain my interlocutors’ answers when querying them about games developed in Africa during our discussions, interviews, and play sessions. I begin with a discussion of what generally is referred to as “serious games.” Damien Djaouti, Julian Alvarez and Jean-Pierre Jessel trace the development of the definition of "serious game" in their essay, highlighting how the definition and boundaries of the term are somewhat fluid and shift over time. Their definition of "any piece of software that merges a non-entertaining purpose (serious) with a video game structure (game)”[85] serves as a good baseline for the present discussion. Serious games cover a wide range of disciplines such as education, healthcare, management, and defence. They are often intended to educate, illustrate best practices, and affect positive change.

Schleiner describes the US-led "Games for Change" movement of activist games which aim to use gaming to "solve problems like [world] hunger."[86] One key example she describes is that of the World Bank-funded *EVOKE* (Jane McGonigal, 2010), a game aimed at promoting entrepreneurial solutions to water and food scarcity, women's marginalization, and other key issues among South African university students. As Schleiner points out, the game, developed in the entrepreneurial environment of Silicon Valley, and promoting the values of the World Bank, has little understanding of the South African context and the struggles of the people whose behaviour it seeks to change through neoliberal

[82] José Messias, Diego Amaral, and Thaiane Oliveira, ‘Playing Beyond Precariousness: The Political Dimension of Brazilian Modding in Pro Evolution Soccer’, in *Video Games and the Global South*, ed. Phillip Penix-Tadsen (Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon University, ETC Press, 2019), 75–76.
[83] He is likely referring to the team’s inclusion as part of the 2006 FIFA World Cup, see ‘Ghana’, Pro Evolution Soccer Wiki, accessed 2 May 2025, https://pes.neoseeker.com/wiki/Ghana.
[84] Xhaq, Interview, 31 October 2024.
[85] Damien Djaouti, Julian Alvarez, and Jean-Pierre Jessel, ‘Classifying Serious Games: The G/P/S Model’, in *Handbook of Research on Improving Learning and Motivation through Educational Games: Multidisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Patrick Felicia (Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, 2011), 119.
[86] Jane McGonigal, ‘Gaming Can Make a Better World’ (TED Talk, TED 2010, Long Beach, CA, February 2010), 1:14, https://www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_gaming_can_make_a_better_world/transcript.

conceptions of entrepreneurship and self-empowerment.[87] Jolene Fisher similarly notes many serious games align with a neoliberal agenda, creating a depoliticized product which emphasises individual empowerment without critiquing underlying socio-political factors.[88] She traces how serious games, increasingly targeted at African audiences, are being heralded as "the next frontier" by international NGOs. However, she cautions, this enthusiasm has little empirical base and may entrench the same top-down western knowledge monopolies and asymmetrical global power structures of earlier (ICT) development efforts.[89] According to her, EVOKE in particular failed to reach most of its target demographic as "the material and immaterial resources necessary for access were beyond the reach of the majority of [Sub-Saharan African] youth, ultimately precluding the [World Bank Institute]'s target demographic from participating and further entrenching existing information/power structures."[90]

As I elaborate in chapter 6, many African game developers are financially reliant on serious games, earning contracts from western NGOs and serious game developers to develop such serious games in either leading or supporting roles. While the inclusion of African developers in these projects diminishes some of the concerns raised by critical scholars by incorporating and strengthening local voices, others remain. Critically, the inclusion of African game developers does not change the asymmetrical power structures of these projects, best illustrated by one game developer’s quote that “We make games about malaria to afford making the fun games we want to make.”[91] Beyond the financial and operational implications of this (discussed in chapter 6), the focus on serious games also shapes the theming of many games produced on the continent.

In keeping with the theme of "games about malaria", an example which attracted notable media attention is *Mosquito Hood* (Momentum Core, 2013) by Nairobi-based Momentum Core. The game aims to educate people on Malaria prevention. Going beyond the serious game focus on educating, the developers cooperated with the Kenyan government which agreed donate mosquito nets to high-risk areas.[92] By focusing on this material outcome and working with local stakeholders, Mosquito Hood highlights a way to achieve results which require going beyond the standard narratives of serious games, avoiding the issues raised above. One game which was frequently mentioned during my research period was *Shkorey* (8D, 2023), developed by Leeuwarden (the Netherlands)-based serious game developer 8D in cooperation with Leti Arts. Shkorey featured prominently in discussions I had with Leti employees and presentations I attended as part of a wider audience. The game is aimed at educating Eritrean youth in the Netherlands on issues of sexual and reproductive health.[93] Shkorey presents an interesting situation in that it is a game targeted at an (immigrant) audience in the West while being largely developed in Africa, which complicates existing analytical frameworks somewhat and makes it an attractive subject for future analyses. Its intent of educating its users on matters of gender equality and health does however make it a classical example of what Fisher calls a "Digital Intervention."[94]

[87] Schleiner, *Transnational Play*, 138–41.
[88] Jolene Fisher, ‘Toward a Political Economic Framework for Analyzing Digital Development Games: A Case Study of Three Games for Africa: Games for Africa’, *Communication, Culture & Critique* 9, no. 1 (March 2016): 40–41, https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12128.
[89] Fisher, 30–33.
[90] Fisher, 36.
[91] Personal conversation, September 2024.
[92] David Rudin, ‘How a Smartphone Game Is Helping to Fight against Malaria in Kenya’, Killscreen, 7 July 2015, https://www.killscreen.com/smartphone-game-helping-fight-against-malaria-kenya/; Sabrina Biot, ‘Combat Malaria with Engaging Video Games’, CGMagazine, 7 July 2015, https://www.cgmagonline.com/articles/features/fighting-malaria-through-video-games/.
[93] 8D, ‘Game on Sexual Health: Shkorey!’, 8D, accessed 6 May 2025, https://8d-games.nl/en/projecten/game-on-sexual-health/.
[94] Fisher, ‘Toward a Political Economic Framework’, 34.

The prevalence of serious games also influenced players who followed the local game development industry. J.J. (himself a developer) mentioned his frustration that "with a lot of African developers you hear about all their funding, the people they're working with, but not really the games that come from that."[95] While Leti's co-operation on Shkorey is mentioned on 8Ds’ website and on the game's page, it and other serious games only receive a single mention on Leti's website consulting section.[96] This means that the serious games remain unknown to most people casually following the developer, who only hear about the process but not the result. Furthermore, serious games generally have a very targeted intended audience, such as Shkorey's focus on specifically Eritrean newcomers to the Netherlands, or Mosquito Hood’s deal with the Kenyan government. Players are aware of these limitations. During our conversations, some interlocutors mentioned that they felt like African-developed games were always educational rather than fun, while also trying to tackle issues that often didn't affect them. This meant they did not pay much attention to the games developed by local developers, even when those were intended to be entertainment focused, as many incorporated similar art styles and gameplay to the serious games due to the developers’ experience with them.

4.3 “Every Game is an Impact Game “: Entertainment Games[97]

In contrast to serious games, entertainment games are designed with the intent of being fun-first. This does not exclude an educational intent. During my stay in Ghana, some developers cautioned me (and other prospective researchers) against drawing a clear distinction between "serious" and "entertainment" games, stating that "every game is an impact game."[98] I nevertheless make this distinction here as I believe that these entertainment-first games are received somewhat differently, even if they often also include an educational, impact-focused intent. Correspondingly, Lloyd Amoah and Eyram Tawia describe how the inclusion of African folklore, history, and culture in locally developed games "not only provided entertainment but also served as a means of preserving and celebrating Africa’s rich cultural heritage."[99] Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang describes how African game developers "largely combine traditional and contemporary aspects of their culture to present a unique gaming experience [...] adopt[ing] traditional aspects of culture to inform the creation of their games as a counterbalance to foreign influence,"[100] akin to writers forced to write in European languages utilizing "the traditional" to set themselves apart and respond to (neo-)colonial hegemonies. Additionally, by including these elements in their games, developers aim to educate players in Africa and beyond on the history and culture of African peoples and counteract stereotypes commonly reinforced by other videogames.[101]

This inclusion of, and negotiation with, cultural elements as a counter to the globalization of Western games unites developers from across countries outside the centres of global game production, aiming to showcase these elements to both a local and global audience. Developers from across

[95] J.J., Interview, 29 October 2024.
[96] Leti Arts, ‘Consulting’, accessed 6 May 2025, https://www.letiarts.com/consulting/.
[97] I presented an early version of this section at the 2025 NVAS Africa Day under the title "The (unrealistic) goal is to avoid pedestrians:” Satire as relatable African Elements in Digital Games." I thank the conference participants for their valuable inputs and feedback.
[98] Tawia et al., ‘The Impact of Esports and Game Development under STEAM Education’.
[99] Lloyd G. Adu Amoah and Eyram Tawia, ‘Africa and the Global Video Games Industry: Ties, Tensions, and Tomorrow’, in *Examining the Rapid Advance of Digital Technology in Africa*, ed. Lloyd G. Adu Amoah (Hershey, PA: IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2024), 53, https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-9962-7.ch003.
[100] Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang, ‘Lost/Gained in Translation: Oware 3D, Ananse: The Origin and Questions of Hegemony’, *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 7, no. 2 (1 June 2015): 157, https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.7.2.155_1.
[101] Amoah and Tawia, ‘Africa and the Global Video Games Industry’, 58.

Southeast Asia,[102] and Latin America,[103] use similar approaches and narratives in their games and marketing campaigns. In the following sections I describe two common ways game developers use to incorporate local heritage in the theming of their entertainment games, and the ways in which the players I interacted with reacted to them.

4.3.1 “Wake the Ancient Spirits of Africa:” Folkloric and Mythological Elements

Folkloric and mythological elements are commonly used, particularly among games developed in East and West Africa.[104] These games draw on traditional stories and mythological elements like gods and spirits. One such game is Leti Arts' *Ananse: The Origin* (Leti Arts, 2014), discussed by Opoku-Agyemang. In the game, the player takes the role of the trickster Kweku Ananse, playing a version of the template folk tale in which Ananse becomes the owner of stories through completing a series of challenges. The tale is remade and adapted to a more "westernised" version of Ananse akin to Western comics' portrayals of gods like Thor (Marvel Comics), while the narrative shifts in accordance with gameplay considerations; giving the tale a linear structure in which one level follows the next, but also making it possible for the player (and thus Ananse) to fail, something unheard of in the folk tale versions of the story. These adaptions, Opoku-Agyemang suggests, serve as ways to navigate western influences on storytelling and technology and interweave them with African themes and thereby make the folklores, mythology, and culture of the latter more accessible.[105] Furthermore, they “counteract the media penetration and influence of ‘overseas superheroes’ created by designers based in the USA and Europe”[106] and allow developers to portray a superhero with their own, African, worldviews and ideals.

Two key games which heavily draw on these mythological elements are *Africa's Legends* (Leti Arts, 2014), and *Aurion: The Legacy of the Kori-Odan* (Kiro'o Games, 2016), one of the first African-developed games to be crowdfunded and released on consoles. In Aurion, the player takes the role of an exiled royal couple, travelling through a world inspired by various African cultures. The spiritual journey and trials the characters undergo are intended to reflect "the common history of Africa and our place in the stakes of the world."[107] Throughout this, the characters draw on the power of their royal legacy and the energy of their ancestors in what one article describes as "using what is essentially African culture, realized as a form of magical energy, to unify the six continents of Auriona."[108] Africa's Legends pits a collection of "African Superheroes" against one-another in battles combining the aesthetics of fighting games like Mortal Kombat (whose popularity I describe in more detail in chapter 5) and the gameplay of match-3 puzzle games. The game's characters include Ananse (a Ghanaian student possessed by the spirit of trickster Kweku Ananse), Shaka Zulu (a South African police officer whose body is possessed by the spirit of the historical Zulu leader), and Wuzu (a Maasai warrior utilising a combination of traditional weapons and sci-fi inspired technology), among others. These characters are

[102] Schleiner, *Transnational Play*, 155–58.
[103] Penix-Tadsen, *Cultural Code*, 102–3.
[104] Kirinya, ‘Africa’, 24.
[105] Opoku-Agyemang, ‘Lost/Gained in Translation’, 163–67.
[106] Paula Callus and Cher Potter, ‘Michezo Video: Nairobi’s Gamers and the Developers Who Are Promoting Local Content’, *Critical African Studies* 9, no. 3 (2 September 2017): 321, https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2017.1371620.
[107] Evan Narcisse, ‘A Video Game That Transports Players to A Different Kind of Africa’, Kotaku, 23 October 2015, https://kotaku.com/a-video-game-that-transports-players-to-a-different-kin-1738354119.
[108] Chris Priestman, ‘Finally, African Fantasy Is Getting Its Own Gorgeous RPG’, Killscreen, 11 March 2015, https://www.killscreen.com/aurion/.

deliberately syncretic, combining elements of African folklore with modern technologies and elements of American superhero comics.[109]

Together with Africa's Legends' mobile game version, the play sessions I conducted included *Sweave* (Leti Arts, 2023) and *Mzito* (Weza Interactive Entertainment, 2017). In Sweave, the player takes the role of a "spirit orb", dodging adinkra symbols and tradition-inspired masks who serve as "guardians of knowledge."[110] In Mzito, meanwhile, the player takes the role of a spirit "symboliz[ing] the pillars of African culture,"[111] travelling across a semi-fictionalised version of Africa to purge spiritual corruption, wake the "Ancient Spirits of Africa,"[112] and restore the glory of Africa. In terms of gameplay both games share similarities too: Sweave asks the player to endlessly dodge obstacles in pursuit of the highest score possible, competing against a regularly resetting leaderboard, while Mzito asks the player to dodge obstacles in distinct levels representing natural landmarks around Africa.

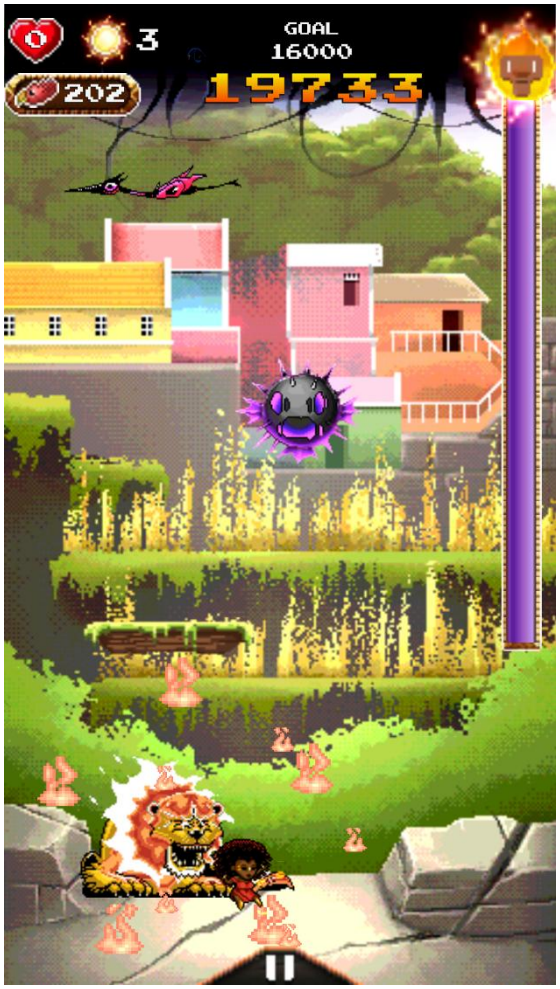

Figure 3: Gameplay of Mzito, Screenshot taken from Weza Interactive Entertainment (2017).

The different cultures of the world of Aurion and its protagonists’ journey through their continents, Mzito’s levels each being a distinct African natural landmark from across the continent such as the Victoria Falls, Bandiagara Esca[r]pment, and Chebika Oasis, and the character choices in Africa’s Legends – including characters from Mali, the Central African Republic, South Sudan and others – all point towards a distinctly Pan-African approach to the games’ themes. Interestingly, both Mzito and Africa’s Legends centrally show the country which their levels are set in, or characters are from. This further highlights the distinct efforts made by these games to incorporate elements from across Africa and serve as the connecting point for different African cultures and regions.

Many of my interlocutors were aware of Africa’s Legends, which has been a mainstay of Leti Arts’ marketing for a decade, although only Lewis, who also played and coached fighting games, had played the game extensively. As Sweave was also developed by Leti, some players had heard of it, while none had previously encountered Mzito, which had been developed some years prior in Kenya and is available through independent game storefront itch.io. While some interlocutors (during the structured interviews and casual conversations) thought it was interesting to see the Adinkra symbols in Sweave,

[109] Tessa Pijnaker and Rachel Spronk, ‘Africa’s Legends: Digital Technologies, Aesthetics and Middle-Class Aspirations in Ghanaian Games and Comics’, *Critical African Studies* 9, no. 3 (2 September 2017): 339–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2017.1371617.
[110] Leti Arts, ‘Behind the Masks: How Art, Culture, and Gaming Collide in SWEAVE’, LinkedIn, 12 March 2025, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/behind-masks-how-art-culture-gaming-collide-sweave-leti-arts-aroqf/.
[111] Weza Interactive Entertainment, ‘Mzito’, itch.io, accessed 12 May 2025, https://wezaie.itch.io/mzito.
[112] AHEREGEORGE, ‘First of the Sleeping Lions.’, *Mzito Dev Blog* (blog), 17 July 2016, https://mzitodevblog.wordpress.com/2016/07/17/first-of-the-sleeping-lions/.

none of them noted particular enthusiasm for seeing these elements of their culture. Rather, as discussed above, the presence of these traditional elements made players wary that the games were trying to be educational rather than entertaining. Some also felt that the focus on African elements limited domestic developers. Xhaq argued that "People are not going to patronize things that include other tribes but not their own,"[113] suggesting that the inclusion of African elements needlessly limited developers' core audience as they would never be able to represent the continents' many cultures. These opinions are interesting when compared to the experiences of Tessa Pijnaker and Rachel Spronk, who note how some of their interlocutors felt that the characters of Africa's Legends were not authentically African enough.[114] This may be due to my interlocutors being from a more middle class background (where they note the game was more popular) than Pijnaker and Spronk's, or could hint at tastes and opinions having shifted in the years since their research.

Xhaq further argued that "African Game Developers should think outside Africa,"[115] noting that Ghanaian players were more interested in original and fun games which maybe paid some homage to their African origin but did not focus on it. Similarly, Sage argued that rather than seeing self-contained African games, he wanted to see what was possible if elements of African folklore and mythology interacted with those from other parts of the world, explicitly mentioning the game *Smite* (Titan Forge Games, 2014) in which gods from various mythologies interact. Elaborating on this sentiment with other interlocutors, they agreed that the focus on traditionally African elements made the games more appealing to an international audience of players and researchers (like me), who would learn about the stories, symbols, and so on through these games. However, akin to players of Thai MMO *Asura* (Debuz Co., 2007),[116] Ghanaian players (my interlocutors and their friends whose experiences they shared with me) did not necessarily consider the inclusion of these culturally specific elements as a selling point, rather being interested in "games which are fun to play." Some interlocutors went even further, arguing that most African games they had played were unoriginal and "mediocre" versions of other popular games with an African coat of paint thrown onto them. In one case, this led to Frank, a player and occasional live streamer, to call for developers to "make something originally African, like a corruption simulator!"

> ***Smite***
>
> Smite is a free-to-play MOBA action-strategy game. Two teams of five players compete in matches to accomplish objectives and gain control over the game’s map. It is most notable both for using a third-person perspective, a novelty in MOBAs, and for its character selection. Characters in Smite are gods or other mythological figures drawn from real-life mythologies. Originally starting with gods from Egyptian, Nordic, Greek, Hindu and Chinese mythology, the game has since expanded to include Celtic, Slavic, Mayan, Yoruba, and other, mythologies.

4.3.2 “The (unrealistic) goal is to avoid pedestrians:” Relatable Everyday Elements

Beyond mythology, some developers draw on themes of the everyday life experiences of their audience and themselves. These games aim to be relatable by presenting everyday situations, often with a satirical twist. Rather than embodying the role of a spirit, hero, or mythological figure, the player usually takes on the role of a mundane, contemporary person.

Crucially, the distinction I make between the mundane and the mythological should not be read as reflecting a division and counterposition between "traditional" and "modern" art which has been

[113] Xhaq, Interview, 31 October 2024.
[114] Pijnaker and Spronk, ‘Africa’s Legends’, 344–46.
[115] Xhaq, Interview, 31 October 2024.
[116] Schleiner, *Transnational Play*, 146.

criticised but remains common in the analysis of African art.[117] As I noted above, mythological games incorporate "modern" elements, whether that be "Western" storytelling and design philosophies or futuristic technologies as elements of their gameworlds. Similarly, the representation of the mundane I describe here is not inherently about any type of "modernity." Rather, this distinction is primarily about the scale and theme of the games: heroes saving the world with much fanfare, or ordinary people living their ordinary lives. This focus on everyday (urban) experiences, the syncretic nature of digital games, and their production by an urban (upper-) middle class suggests that games, particularly “everyday games” as I classify them here, may be read as a type of African popular art as described by Karin Barber.[118] This lens helps to analyse and explain some of the elements which developers chose to incorporate into their games.[119]

Of note among these everyday games are what I classify as "driving games": games which centre around driving a bus or motorbike through traffic, dodging obstacles, and pimping one's ride. The Kenyan *Ma3Racer* (Planet Ruckus, 2011), an early example of a driving game, was the subject of an article in The Economist, which describes the game's goal as "The (unrealistic) goal is to avoid pedestrians"[120] and suggests that, within a month, a quarter of a million people from across the globe had downloaded the game. In the game, which unfortunately is no longer playable on modern devices (and as such was not part of the play sessions), the player pilots a *matatu* – one of Kenya's (in)famous minibuses - down an endless stretch of road, collecting coins and avoiding obstacles and other buses.[121] Similar games include titles like *Nganya 254* (AfriDev Games, 2022), *Commuter Van Racing Kenya* (Mzii Ent, 2024) and the Nigerian *Okada Ride* (Maliyo Games, 2012). In Okada Ride, the player pilots an *okada* bike-taxi through the streets of Lagos. Lampooning lax safety regulations and their enforcement, the game's character wears a steel bucket as a helmet (see Figure 4).

[117] Will Rea, ‘“Our Tradition Is a Very Modern Tradition” From Cultural Tradition to Popular Culture in Southwestern Nigeria’, in *Popular Culture in Africa: The Episteme of the Everyday*, ed. Stephanie Newell and Onookome Okome (New York: Routledge, 2014), 48–50, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203587966.

[118] Karin Barber, ‘Popular Arts in Africa’, *African Studies Review* 30, no. 3 (September 1987): 1, https://doi.org/10.2307/524538.

[119] At present I hesitate to confidently describe all games as popular art as I lack the necessary familiarity with the scholarship but believe that this is an insightful lens for future analyses of African developed games and their production.

[120] The Economist, ‘Upwardly Mobile: Kenya’s Technology Start-up Scene Is about to Take Off’, The Economist, 25 August 2012, http://web.archive.org/web/20120829153333/https://www.economist.com/node/21560912.

[121] GameTurka, ‘Ma3 Racer Android GamePlay’, YouTube, 12 December 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2X9WDV-h9pA.

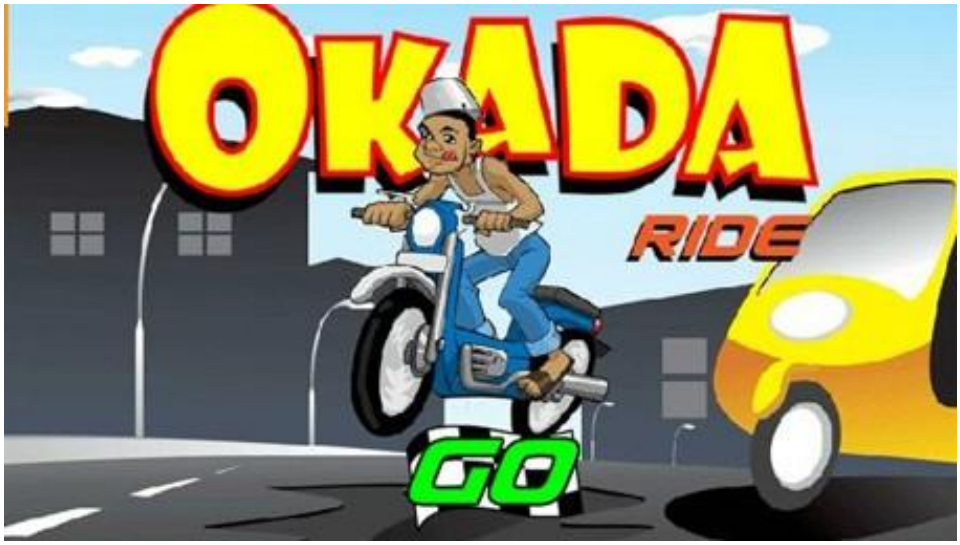

Figure 4: Okada Ride, Screenshot taken from Maliyo Games (2012)

Matatus, okadas and similar means of transport, the roads they travel on and the locations they stop at can serve as notable cultural signifiers. These vehicles are a common theme of many people's lives, as they spend time each day riding them, dodging them, or being stuck in traffic with them.[122] This also makes them the source of much ire, with frustrations about traffic, bad drivers, and the state of roads being common topics of everyday discussion. As becomes apparent with the Economist quote and the steel bucket helmet, these games allow developers and players to address their everyday grievances in a playful and humorous manner by exaggerating - and taking part in - the actions of such drivers. This highlights the satirical bent of many of these games. This satirical approach is one of the ways in which game developers, as creatives, “individually or collectively try to overcome the inherent contradictions, antimonies, and paradoxes of urban life as they perceive and conceive it.”[123]

Paula Callus and Cher Potter note a similar pattern regarding the recurring motif of the chicken in Kenyan-developed games, which commonly features in games due to its "prevalence in domestic settings and across economic sectors in present day Kenyan society."[124] They argue that the chicken’s domestic association, rather than its mythological status, make it a strategic tool of everyday relatability and localisation.[125] Similarly, Schleiner argues that it is the specific localisation of the Malaysian loan shark which "strikes a humorous cultural chord with Southeast Asian players"[126] in *Ahlong Attack* (Hezmedia Interactive, 2012). In order to discuss the role and appeal of satire in these games in more detail, and to examine how players reacted to these mundane elements, I use the next section to analyse one key African-developed satirical game.

[122] For some insightful discussions into this, see Stasik and Cissokho, ‘Introduction to Special Issue: Bus Stations in Africa’, *Africa Today* 65, no. 2 (2018), https://doi.org/10.2979/africatoday.65.2.01; and the contributions in Kurt Beck, *The Making of the African Road* (Carol Stream: BRILL, 2017).
[123] Till Förster, ‘On Creativity in African Urban Life: African Cities as Sites of Creativity and Emancipation’, in *Popular Culture in Africa: The Episteme of the Everyday*, ed. Stephanie Newell and Onookome Okome, Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies 58 (New York: Routledge, 2014), 37, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203587966.
[124] Callus and Potter, ‘Michezo Video’, 312.
[125] Callus and Potter, 310–12.
[126] Schleiner, *Transnational Play*, 150.

4.3.3 “The Most Hilarious Game in Africa:” Case Study: *The Elites of Mboa*

The satirical tone described above is at the core of Cameroonian-developed *Le Reponsable / The Elites of Mboa* (Kiro'o Games, 2022). In the self-declared "Most Hilarious Game in Africa"[127] the player takes the role of a recent university graduate conducting an internship at the government of the "very, very democratic republic of Mboa,"[128] a fictional francophone African state. Throughout the internship, the character is regularly confronted with opportunities to engage in corruption - akin to Frank's proposed corruption simulator described above.

Mboa's gameplay is inspired by life simulation games like *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000-present) franchise and *Papers, Please* (3909 LLC, 2013), asking the player to balance the daily physiological and financial needs of their character with their work and requests from colleagues, superiors, and the character's family and girlfriend, the latter two regularly asking for large sums of money for "your cousin's graduation," new kitchen supplies, and various other expenses. As the player's base wage does not cover these requests, the game pushes them towards accepting the various bribes they encounter. Additionally, the character's manager early on points out that, to succeed and be a good civil servant, one also must take care of their family's requests. As such, the game promises a better score achievable through engaging in bribes as needed to sustain oneself and one's family. Furthermore, this ties into the game's morality system - an abstract ranking of whether the character is a good or bad person. While these points are gained and lost by fulfilling requests on time or conversely, cheating on the character's girlfriend, the simple act of accepting a bribe does not impact it. In fact, by allowing the character to fulfil requests, it may even lead to them being judged not just as a better civil servant - but also a better person.

> ***The Sims & Papers, Please***
>
> The Sims, one of the best-selling video games series of all time,[129] is a sandbox life simulation. The player creates a household of characters, builds their home, and simulates their life, helping them gain skills, advance in jobs and relationships.
>
> In Papers, Please the player takes the role of a border guard in a fictional authoritarian country. Gameplay consists of checking travellers’ documents for any inconsistencies, choosing who can enter the country and who is turned away. The player is paid for following orders, but can also chose to accept bribes, with the money required to pay for the food, heating, and medical cost of one’s family.

The game sports a cartoonish art style which exaggerates the features of the various characters the player meets, particularly the Big Men in charge of the country and its ministries. The environments are distinctly recognizable; with researchers I discussed the game with mentioning how the game's screenshots felt immediately familiar to the government offices they spent their time in for work and some players pointing out how the character's house was similar to their own. The game opens with multiple disclaimers, first informing the player that the game is a work of fiction and any resemblance to real-life people and events is purely coincidental, "unless we [the developers] say so" (see figure 5), and then informing the player that the choices they make in the game (i.e. whether or not to engage in corruption) are the player's and that the studio will not be shamed for them. This addition to the standard fictitious person disclaimer further communicates the game's critical and satirical tone to the audience from the moment they start up the game, while the second disclaimer can be read as a pre-emptive response to the common criticism of developers for supposedly condoning the actions possible in their games.

[127] MboaCity, ‘The Elite the Mboa : The Most Hilarious Game in Africa - Game Trailer’, YouTube, 28 June 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TK9JeN-xx8w.
[128] Kiro’o Games Studio, ‘Bienvenue Dans La République Du Mboa’, Le Reponsable Mboa, 26 July 2024, https://leresponsable-mboa.com/.
[129] Amir Shoam, ‘The Sims: 22 Years and Counting’, TechSpot, 25 July 2022, https://www.techspot.com/article/2497-the-sims/.

Figure 5: Mboa's fictitious person disclaimer, Screenshot taken from Kiro'o Games (2022).

While Mboa's slow start and reading-heavy gameplay did not make it a great candidate for play sessions, I chose to nevertheless show it to some of my interviewees to see their reactions. Notably, in all of the play sessions, the players took the initial bribe which is offered as a way to introduce the system to the player (see figure 6), noting that they wanted to see what would happen. Discussing this in the stimulated recall afterwards J.J. mentioned that while he wouldn't take a bribe in real-life, games not only allow the player to do things they wouldn't do, they also "reveal to us how these people might be thinking"[130] by letting the player embody a typical civil servant and the struggles they face. Here, the interactive nature of games supports the productive nature of popular art:[131] rather than the game simply reflecting government corruption, the player’s actions produce outcomes based on their interaction with – and opinion of – the issue.

Figure 6: Taking the initial bribe in Mboa, Screenshot taken from Kiro'o Games (2022)

Overall, despite its comparatively slow and action-less gameplay going against what interviewees described as their preferred game styles, Mboa was the most popular game during play sessions. Unlike the indifference towards folkloric elements described above, my interlocutors were enthusiastic to see modern-day "everyday" African experiences represented on the screen, asking me for a link to the game so they could play it themselves outside of our play session. The themes of games like Mboa

[130] J.J., Interview, 29 October 2024.
[131] Peter Tirop Simatei, ‘Heshimu Ukuta: Local-Language Ratio and the Performance of Fan Culture in Kenya’, in *Popular Culture in Africa: The Episteme of the Everyday*, ed. Stephanie Newell and Onookome Okome, Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies 58 (New York: Routledge, 2014), 268–69, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203587966.

and Okada Ride are more immediate to the players' everyday experiences and their "uniquely African" elements cannot easily be replicated by other games, while mythological themes invite comparison to high-budget productions like *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio, 2018) and *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science, 2024).

Mboa is explicitly satirical in its nature, exaggerating its characters and their actions to invite humour largely based on frustrations with African governments. Interestingly, when querying South African teenagers on what they would make if they could make a South African game, Marion Walton and Nicola Pallitt note how most groups did so by satirizing current political issues facing the country.[132] This satirical approach allows both developers and players to comment on, and engage with, their grievances and complaints with aspects of their society and everyday lives. Understandably, the popularity of Mboa with my interviewees, and Frank's initial call for a corruption simulator, are - at least to some extent - a reaction to frustrations with Ghana's current political climate: most immediately the "Ghost Name Scandal" in which thousands of fake profiles received government funding for supposed National Service Secretariat (NSS) labour.[133] Along these lines, Mboa's theme did raise some concern with players, who feared that the developer's safety may be at risk due to them discussing politically sensitive topics. Given the developers’ transparency and visibility, it is unlikely that they themselves consider it a risk, although my interlocutors’ concern may be interesting to analyse further in the future.

God of War & Black Myth: Wukong

God of War is an action-adventure game set in Nordic mythology. A reimagining of the earlier God of War series set in Greek mythology, it is instead set in Nordic mythology and follows the former Greek god of war Kratos and his son on a journey through the world of Midgard. The game received widespread acclaim for its design, art, narrative and characters, winning multiple game of the year awards.[134]

Black Myth: Wukong is an action-game retelling of the classical Chinese Journey to the West. The game’s protagonist travels through the world of Chinese mythology, aiming to recover the legendary monkey king Sun Wukong. The game was (one of) the first high-budget productions developed by the Chinese video games industry and was one of the most played and acclaimed games released in 2024.[135]

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed how developers, based abroad and in Africa, chose to incorporate African elements in their games, and how players react to those elements. Players were not particularly concerned with the representation of Africa as a whole in mainstream games – while some noted some discontent with African countries primarily being represented through civil wars and narratives of wilderness and violence – most my interlocutors treated these as mostly harmless action movie tropes. Specific representations of Ghana raised some more concern about authenticity, as those representations were now tied to the global perception of the country and its people. Such representations however also signalled that Ghana and its people had attracted enough attention to be acknowledged by foreign game developers, which was cause for celebration.

[132] Marion Walton and Nicola Pallitt, ‘“Grand Theft South Africa”: Games, Literacy and Inequality in Consumer Childhoods’, *Language and Education* 26, no. 4 (July 2012): 355–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2012.691516.
[133] Eric Afatsao, ‘Over the 40,000 NSS Ghost Names Scandal, Beatrice Annan of the NDC Pokes Fun at Bawumia.’, *Spencer Wan Blog on GhanaWeb* (blog), 5 December 2024, https://www.ghanaweb.com/blogs/spencerwan/Over-the-40-000-NSS-ghost-names-scandal-Beatrice-Annan-of-the-NDC-pokes-fun-at-Bawumia-4164.
[134] ‘God of War (Video Game 2018) - Awards’, IMDb, accessed 26 June 2025, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5838588/awards/.
[135] Ryan Dinsdale, ‘Black Myth: Wukong Lifts Steam to 37 Million Concurrent Players for First Time’, IGN, 27 August 2024, https://www.ign.com/articles/black-myth-wukong-lifts-steam-to-37-million-concurrent-players-for-first-time.

Serious games hold an important position in the continent’s game development ecosystem as the main source of funding for many developers. This financial reliance reflects and reinforces unequal global power structures and development narratives. Additionally, it leads to many players being frustrated with local developers, as they feel games are "too" educational and trying to tackle issues that don't affect them rather than focusing on being fun. Accordingly, even with non-educational games players felt like the games were too focused on educating people, rather than "being fun to play." In contrast to this, In contrast to this, game developers often aim for their entertainment games to have an educational impact, which is particularly notable with games drawing on African folklore and mythology for their theme. This inclusion of local cultural elements is a way for game developers to set themselves apart from (Western) game developers, respond to their hegemony in game development, and counteract stereotypes which remain common in games. Many games are syncretic, deliberately combining Western and African elements to make them more appealing to both audiences, interestingly often with a Pan-African approach which connects different parts of the continent. While players appreciated seeing recognizable African elements in games, they often felt like these limited developers, and they would rather "game developers think outside Africa" in order to reach a wider, international audience. Games which incorporate mundane, everyday experiences – potentially read as a type of popular art – were received more positively. These games are often satirical in nature and let players and developers address – and take part in – common everyday frustrations like traffic. They are relatable to many players, and their unique elements cannot easily be compared to other, more popular games, as they present mostly unique situations.

5 “Fostering a Culture that Celebrates the Things We’re Passionate About:” Subcultures and Spaces of Gaming in Accra

I had arrived at the party venue quite early. Having to travel through most of Accra by Uber meant that arriving at the announced start time in the late afternoon would have meant risking even more traffic delays. Rather, I decided, I'd show up too early, as I usually did when it was an option, help with the setup, and get to know people. I arrived in time for the latter, but helping with the setting up of the equipment - a large suitcase-style speaker somebody brought, and a few consoles connected to TV screens - would have to wait, as the power had just gone out. As we got talking, and once the power returned shortly after, the first few guests started trickling in. This group, one of the organisers pointed out, was all the students and people who could leave work early; everybody else would probably still be a while as they would first have to get off work and then brave the Friday evening rush hour. Even if that group would arrive later, the demographics would stay roughly the same: the vast majority of attendees were in their 20s.

When people arrived, they usually did so in groups of three to five, with friends and partners accompanying one person who knew one of the organisers or somebody who had invited them. So, while some people knew each other, most did not - something the organiser hoped to amend with a small game asking people to team up with strangers. After all, he had told me while brainstorming this some weeks earlier, if the event was for players, why not make its very structure playful too? I noted how soon after larger amounts of people began to arrive, a split began to appear. The inside of the house began to resemble a LAN party, with people huddled around a few laptops organizing matches of Valorant and Fortnite amongst themselves. Save for some game noises and occasional discussion, it was relatively quiet, with people focused on their games rather than talking. On the outside, meanwhile, music was blasting from the speaker. Some groups had gathered to play Uno; others were coalescing around the bar studying the cocktail menu and waiting for the bartender to finish setting up. Discussions ranged from everyday conversations about university, to stereotypical "nerd-talk" like rating current anime or arguing over the depiction of physics concepts in sci-fi media.

Most people, however, had gathered around the TV screens where PlayStations had been set up. Next to Mortal Kombat, a staple in Ghana, people were competing in one of the Naruto fighting games. Even from my outside observer position, a rift was apparent: the players who were skilled at the games and clearly had spent a long time playing them were dominating the casual players, showing no mercy in their matchups. Nevertheless, the crowd was enthusiastically observing, cheering on impressive plays, and in some cases, waiting for their turn to play and prove their own skill.

In his 2015 description of games culture across Africa, Wesley Kirinya states that it is “mainly centred on game-playing parties with a group of players. Playing a video game is a social and fun event where players enjoy watching other players play.”[136] While the situation has shifted somewhat in the decade since, in-person interactions remain and important way in which players engage with their peers and with games. In this chapter, I look at the physical and social spaces which constitute Accra’s gaming ecosystem. To do this, I highlight the how, why, where, and who of playing digital games in the city and how they reflect the state and history of gaming in Ghanaian society. I draw on theories of subculture to describe how players pursue a community and societal support both locally and on a global scale. These aspirations, I argue, link to the experiences of many of the players, who as urban African (often middle-class) youth navigate uncertain situations in which the image of a better life is available, but out

[136] Kirinya, ‘Africa’, 25.

of reach. As part of this, I argue that gamer subculture can be read as a reaction to the situation of waithood many African youths find themselves in.

5.1 “Male Teenager Loners:” Gamers as a Subculture

Authors in academia and beyond have long used the concept of the subculture to discuss "gamers", particularly drawing on the image of the male teenage loner hardcore gamer as a popular shorthand. As Adrienne Shaw points out, this stereotype is often noted by texts which aim to highlight non-stereotypical groups of game players. Yet in their attempts to do so, she notes, those very same stereotypes and stigmas are asserted and reinforced, with "hardcore" identity still often being tied to subcultural capital and primarily the realm of the stereotypical young men.[137] In a recent contribution building on Shaw’s work, Giulio Pitroso argues that many of these authors use the term as a catch-all without properly considering and engaging with it as a sociological concept.[138] As such, in this section I engage with the theory of subcultures to lay out how I use the term in my analysis.

While Pitroso is sceptical of the concept of subculture's overall applicability, he highlights how *post-subcultural* theories can be effectively used to analyse the situation of gamer communities particularly in global south contexts.[139] One such framework, as laid out in Adam Meikle's analysis of digital game players in Durban and Johannesburg, investigates gamers as a subculture of consumption. This refers to a subculture which "self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity"[140] which Meikle argues the South African Gamers he worked with do through their commitment to the economic and cultural factors of gaming.[141] He further draws on Hodkinson, who, in laying out his conception of subculture, is particularly critical of earlier theories' tendency to locate media and commercial activity in opposition to subcultures. Hodkinson notes how, by the time of his writing in the early 2000s, changes in popular culture since the first generation of subcultural theories of the 1960s and 1970s have significantly altered this relationship.[142] This reimagining of the relationships is particularly relevant to gaming as a commercial media product as the subculture relies to some extent on consuming and interacting with commercial media. As such, the relationship is much more complex than mutual conflict in which subculture is inevitably hijacked by commercial forces as in the traditional definition of a subculture.

Hodkinson lays out four indicators through which he hopes to combine previous subcultural theories with his more nuanced approach to media, commerce, resistance and class conflict. The indicators are identity, commitment, consistent distinctiveness, and autonomy. These indicators interact to highlight the elements of participation in a subculture. Consistent distinctiveness refers to the shared tastes and values common across members and consistent across time. A key example of this is which games are considered popular and how, as I argue below, value is given to those games. Identity refers to the ways members self-perceive as part of a group, referring to oneself as "gamers". As I will elaborate, akin to Hodkinson's goths, the feeling of kinship and like-mindedness which came with this

[137] Adrienne Shaw, ‘What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies’, *Games and Culture* 5, no. 4 (October 2010): 407–9, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009360414.
[138] Giulio Pitroso, ‘Beyond Subcultures: A Literature Review of Gaming Communities and Sociological Analysis’, *New Media & Society*, 16 May 2024, 3–4, https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448241252392.
[139] Pitroso, 5–6.
[140] John W. Schouten and James H. McAlexander, ‘Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers’, *Journal of Consumer Research* 22, no. 1 (June 1995): 43, https://doi.org/10.1086/209434.
[141] Adam Meikle, ‘A New Approach To Subculture: Gaming As A Substantial Subculture Of Consumption’ (MA Thesis, Durban, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2013), 13.
[142] Paul Hodkinson, *Goth: Identity, Style, and Subculture*, Dress, Body, Culture (Oxford ; New York: Berg, 2002), 12–13.

identification was not limited to the location of Accra, but rather a global gamer identity. Commitment refers to the ways in which the subculture becomes part of participants' everyday lives, taking over their free time, friendships and habits. Lastly, autonomy refers to the infrastructure of organisations, independent entrepreneurs, and enthusiasts which create internal subcultural media, commerce, and activities, such as fan magazines and parties.[143]

5.2 “They Aren’t Even Real Gamers:” The Subculture of Gamers

Most of the gamers I encountered during my research stay were in the range of late teens to mid-20s, similar to the attendees of the party I described in the introduction to this chapter. While this is unlikely to be representative of the overall demographics of people who play digital games in Accra, various interlocutors pointed out that this group had the most ideal background to be gamers: unlike children they were not reliant on their parents for money, and unlike older adults their time was not taken up entirely by work and family obligations. The combination of available time and money makes this group the most visible and with the highest rate of commitment. They are most able to engage in “hardcore” play and thereby establish subcultural capital and acknowledgement. Critically, this group falls into the stereotype of gamers as supposedly inherently insular, male and young,[144] which I have noted above. As such, they share demographic, and as I hope to argue, idealistic similarities with gamers in different geographic contexts who have been the subject of academic analyses.

One such subculture are the gamers of Udaipur, India’s “Gaming Zones” described by Snodgrass *et al*. They conceive of the gaming zones as "culturally dissonant" meeting spaces for the subculture of "true gamers," an imagined community informed by global online conversations, values and styles. This subcultural belonging and the pursuit of subcultural capital clashes with the mainstream traditional Rajasthani values demanding they focus on their education and starting a family. Udaipuri gamers, they argue, both seek escapism from these expectations, but also internalize them and the stigma of being "losers" and social rejects that comes with not pursuing them.[145] While they do not draw on Hodkinson's indicators, they can be found in the descriptions. The pursuit of "true gamer" status points towards the shared values and styles, as well as identification with the global gamer community which link to consistent distinctiveness and identity. Commitment is clearly visible in the descriptions of the long hours spent gaming, envisioned through the lens of addiction by society and many of the gamers themselves.

The situation many gamers, in Udaipur, Accra, and elsewhere, find themselves in, may be considered a type of waithood. As Manuel Alcinda Honwana describes it, many African youth find themselves in a position where they are unable to establish their independence after leaving school, “they are no longer children who require care, yet they are not yet considered mature social adults.”[146] The association of gaming with childhood, as I discussed in chapter 3, likely further reinforce this (self-)perception of gamers as stuck between youth and adulthood. As such, gamers’ commitment to their subculture may represent a way of coping with the situation of waithood. However, as highlighted by Snodgrass *et al.,* this can also be a deliberate choice, extending one’s time before entering social adulthood and the expectations that come with it.[147] While this is more widely applicable in the Udaipuri context where arranged marriages mean a forced entry into adulthood, Honwana does note how “[s]ome

[143] Hodkinson, 29–33.
[144] Shaw, ‘What Is Video Game Culture?’, 408.
[145] Snodgrass et al., ‘Indian Gaming Zones as Oppositional Subculture’, 772–74.
[146] Alcinda Manuel Honwana, *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa* (Boulder, CO: Kumarian Press, 2013), 3.
[147] Snodgrass et al., ‘Indian Gaming Zones as Oppositional Subculture’, 779.

privileged youths may choose to avoid the responsibilities of adulthood, as some may continue to live with and depend on their parents.”[148] Even for those youth involuntarily in waithood however, this does not mean simply resigning to one’s position, but includes the creation of new spaces and subcultures, taking both local and global inspirations thanks to the spread of communications technology.[149]

The status of the “true” gamer particularly highlights the globally interconnected nature of the subcultural values and tastes. During one conversation with some interlocutors regarding console ownership and the popularity of specific games, somebody complained: "Why do people buy PS5s just to play FIFA? They're barely even real gamers."[150] The argument was that players who primarily played EAFC/FIFA could not consider themselves "true" gamers as they often only played said game, which was not only very mainstream, but also a sports game. This disparagement of sports game franchises like EAFC, NBA2K, and Madden, which all seek to simulate “real” sports like football and basketball, is quite common worldwide and particularly among online gamer spaces, where these games are considered as less legitimate than other, non-sports games. Interestingly, despite this disparagement, both the interlocutors involved in the initial conversation, as well as many others, acknowledged that they had entered the hobby through playing EAFC, which they further acknowledged was one of the only games one could easily play in Ghana. As such, their standpoint towards the game was not necessarily based on personal tastes, but on the global imaginations of what it means to be a gamer.

Beyond these global connections, being a gamer is also shaped by local factors. Referencing the stigma I have discussed in chapter 3, my friend and interlocutor Kax described the sorts of people one could meet in Accra’s in-person and digital gaming spaces: "Everybody here, their parents are either liberal, don't care, or are dead."[151] While initially intended as an off-handed comment, this immediately became one of my research period’s most insightful statements, and one many other interlocutors I shared it with saw themselves reflected in. On one hand, the level of commitment that came with being a gamer was only possible if one’s parents did not, or could not, interfere. On the other, it highlighted the marginal, hopeless, and at times perhaps even dystopic situation many found themselves in, lacking a familial support system. In this context, membership in gamer subculture as a type of escapism gives access to social networks which gamers otherwise may not have.

5.3 “They Treat You Like a Unicorn:” Players and Gamers beyond Young Men

Naturally, not everyone is able to invest the time and resources required to maintain the subcultural capital of gamer identity, while others do not fall into the demographic stereotypes of gamers – but might consider themselves part of the subculture regardless. In line with my intent to go beyond analysing just young men, this section covers other groups and how they fit into the ecosystem of gaming and gamers in Accra.

[148] Honwana, *The Time of Youth*, 5.
[149] Honwana, 4–7.
[150] Personal Conversation, September 2024.
[151] Kax, Personal conversation, 27 September 2024.

Conversations about the gaming habits of some of my “older” (male) interlocutors - in their 30s and 40s – sketched out a different engagement and commitment with the hobby and culture of games. Most of them described how playing less time-intensive mobile games like *Toy Blast* (Peak Games, 2014) and *Township* (Playrix, 2011) with occasional below-30 minutes play sessions fit into their daily routine better than the hours-long EAFC marathons of their younger counterparts. Their daily routines, often shaped by family and work obligations, left less time for time-intensive play sessions at game centres and other events.

Toy Blast & Township

Toy Blast is a free-to-play puzzle game developed for mobile devices. Gameplay consists of matching blocks of matching colours in the right order to score increasing number of points. With thousands of levels on offer, players can play the game nearly endlessly.

Township is a free-to-play farming simulator and city-building game for mobile. The player slowly builds and expands their own farm. Production is linked to real-time, making players return to the game frequently throughout the day for short sessions.

However, while the mobile games played by these interlocutors are generally considered more casual, the commitment and community some of them described challenges this distinction. One interlocutor casually mentioned that he had, some years ago, been part of an active Ghanaian *Clash of Clans* (Supercell, 2012) community primarily made up of working professionals like doctors, lawyers and professors from all over the country. Despite many of the community leading busy lifestyles, they would regularly organise in-game activities at all hours of the day, even staying up far beyond midnight or waking each other up if the situation called for it. At a more global scale, Malik discussed being part of a large, international *Lords Mobile* (I Got Games, 2016) community. He described how through the game, he had met people from Europe, the USA, South Africa, Australia and various other countries and developed friendships with them. These friendships transcended the game, with one of his friends visiting him in Ghana some years ago. As with Clash of Clans, Lords Mobile often requires players to be online at all hours of the day to respond to other players' actions. As such, sometimes Malik and his friends would wake each other up if their presence was urgently required, as their spread across time zones meant somebody was usually available. This meant exchanging out-of-game contact information, often phone numbers (for WhatsApp) with people from across the globe. Further highlighting the levels of trust and friendship in the online community, when players knew each other well enough they would go beyond sharing contact information to sharing account details - instead of having to wake up another person, the player would simply log in on their account. As this login process is sometimes linked to Facebook, this meant that, as Malik described it: "Because of this game, somebody has given me their Facebook account,"[152] letting him access not just their in-game account, but trusting him with control over a notable part of their (digital) social life.

Clash of Clans & Lords Mobile

Clash of Clans and Lords Mobile are both free-to-play strategy mobile games with fantasy settings. In both games the player is tasked with building a base and training an army with which to conquer other players’ bases. Construction, training, and army movement are all linked to real-life time, requiring players to regularly check the game. Both games encourage players to form communities to support one another and fight against larger groups of opponents.

The high levels of commitment described by my interlocutors, who would adjust their sleep schedules according to what was happening in the games, and the close-knit communities they built in those games, further work towards challenging the stereotypical image of gamer subculture. While many of these players were not as visible in Accra’s physical gaming spaces due to other commitments, their engagement with games highlights that games are not just the space of young adults in waithood

[152] Malik, Personal conversation, 21 August 2024.

seeking escapism from their situation. Further, it presents an example of how social adults marry their obligations with their gaming activities.

Female players are a second group not always considered as part of the gamer subculture, whether in Accra or on a global level. The marginalised role of women and other marginalised genders in game player, esports, and game developer spaces has been a key topic in games journalism and academia, and I do not aim to fully summarize or discuss it here, as doing so would require significantly more space and attention than I can dedicate to it. Rather, I aim to explore the experiences of the women I talked to and observed during my research period, and link them to existing scholarship, as properly incorporating their experiences was one of the goals I set for my research.

Eve, a game developer, noted how although she played a lot of games herself, she did not visit game centres, as "if you're a girl and go to a game centre they treat you like a unicorn."[153] The situation she and others described reflects that described by Milimu; most people in Nairobi’s game centres acknowledged them as are tough spaces for women, either due to unspoken rules, or them getting all the men's attention and being put in an uncomfortable situation.[154] As these spaces are seen as the domain of young, often truant, men, parents in particular are wary of their daughters entering these spaces. During my own visits to game centres, I only encountered a handful of women; all of them accompanying their (male) partner, sometimes simply observing, other times playing as well. This reflects a pattern which Tawia noted during a talk in 2013, when he described how "the females that attended are just girlfriends of the geeks,"[155] while talking about how less than 10% of attendees at a Nigerian games convention had been women; something he hoped would change in future years, but which remains a pattern in the present.

Nevertheless, some women enter these spaces. Crystal, an esports organiser and athlete, mentioned how she no longer owned a personal gaming setup as she had decided that playing from game centres was more economical. Acinelle primarily plays from home, but between her streaming, influencing, and participation in various EAFC tournaments (both women's tournaments and men's tournaments), is a visible figure in the community. Unlike Eve, neither mentioned facing a notable amount of marginalisation, although I did not pursue this line of questions particularly actively and more focused questions may have yielded more insights.

5.4 “If You’re Ghanaian, You Have to Play Mortal Kombat:” What People Play

One question I regularly encountered, both during my research in Accra and when discussing it before and after my stay, was whether I would discuss "What people play:” which games were particularly popular and widely played. While I initially doubted how relevant and useful such a description would be, it revealed interesting patterns which highlight the structure of Accra's gaming ecosystem.

As I have discussed throughout this thesis, the game I encountered most often, and which most people listed as the most popular in Ghana, was the EA Sports FC (formerly FIFA) franchise. The franchise is the biggest and most popular (association) football simulation game on the market, with some

[153] Eve, Personal Conversation, 28 October 2024.
[154] Milimu, ‘Playing Offside’, 126.
[155] Wesley Kirinya and Eyram Tawia, ‘The Emerging Landscape of African Game Development’ (Game Developers Conference 2013, San Francisco, 2013), 13:49, https://gdcvault.com/play/1018024/The-Emerging-Landscape-of-African.

of the highest performance in all metrics, both engagement and financial, across all digital games.[156] In the game the player takes control of a football team, manager, or player, competing against the game and other players in-person or online, either in one-off matches or long-running simulations of entire seasons. The franchise offers various game-modes and playstyles with, as of the most recent instalment, "19,000+ players across 700+ teams in more than 120 stadiums and over 30 leagues."[157] Given both the franchise's overwhelming popularity and the wider popularity of football in Ghana, this dominant position is hardly surprising. Discussing the series’ popularity in Kenya, Milimu’s interlocutors noted "their familiarity with football as former players or viewers of European football and its players"[158] as a reason, something that corresponds with the conversations I had in Ghana. Unlike most other games, which required learning not just the game’s controls but also its rules, the rules of football are general knowledge. This reduces the barrier of entry, as players can achieve proficiency in the game faster due to only having to learn how to control their character.

However, as multiple of my interlocutors noted, the game’s widespread popularity in Ghana is not simply the result of both football and EAFC's global popularity. When listing what he considered to be the most popular games in Ghana, among them EAFC, Sage described how each of them had become popular due to being available in most game centres in the past, where they were one of the only options available to players. Kenyan gaming educator/influencer Brian "Thee Beast" Diang'a makes a similar argument regarding the EAFC series’ dominance throughout Africa, noting that the inaccessibility of digital storefronts means that people learn to play, and continue to play, what is widely available in game centres - namely EAFC. Those centres, in return, match their customers' demands rather than seeking out new games.[159] J.J. noted his frustration with this system, mentioning that game centres with PCs only offer popular competitive multiplayer games like Valorant which means that that non-competitive and single-player games remain inaccessible to many people.

Other games I frequently encountered, and whose popularity some interlocutors noted, were God of War, *Grand Theft Auto* V (Rockstar North 2013), and Mortal Kombat. Interestingly, in contrast to EAFC, each of these franchises has been the subject of public outcry and moral panics over their depiction of sex, violence, and gore - although nobody I talked

Grand Theft Auto & Mortal Kombat

Grand Theft Auto (GTA) is a series of action-adventure games set in a satirical, exaggerated version of the USA. The player takes the control of criminals and gets engaged in various criminal operations. They can also choose to roam around the world freely, engaging in various legal and illegal side activities. The series is overwhelmingly popular, but has also been the subject of significant controversy for its depictions of (realistic) violence, torture, drug abuse, and sexual content.[160]

Mortal Kombat is a series of fighting games set in a fantasy setting. Players fight in short, fast-paced one versus one matches to determine a winner. The series is most well-known for its exaggerated violence finisher moves, which depict the gore-filled murder of the losing player’s character. These “fatalities” made the game a key target of moral panics in the early 1990s and led to the creation of ESBR age ratings in North America.[161]

[156] Tamara Verheij, ‘FC 24 and FIFA 23: How Do Their Launches Compare?’, *Newzoo Spotlight* (blog), 21 November 2023, https://newzoo.com/resources/blog/newzoo-spotlight-ea-sports-fc-24-october-2023.
[157] Electronic Arts, ‘EA SPORTS FC™ 25 Unrivalled Authenticity - Leagues & Licenses’, 17 July 2024, https://www.ea.com/games/ea-sports-fc/fc-25/news/authenticity.
[158] Milimu, ‘Playing Offside’, 121.
[159] David Benjamin et al., ‘Tournament Culture in Africa’, X Spaces, Gameit9ja Podcasts, n.d., accessed 10 November 2024.
[160] Luke Winkie, ‘Grand Theft Auto’s Greatest Controversies’, PC Gamer, 20 October 2021, https://www.pcgamer.com/grand-theft-auto-controversies/.
[161] Nicole Carpenter, ‘How Mortal Kombat Invented the ESRB’, Polygon, 19 April 2021, https://www.polygon.com/22346875/mortal-kombat-violence-esrb-ratings-lieberman.

to in Ghana noted these same moral panics happening there.[162] I most regularly encountered Mortal Kombat during my visits to game centres and gaming events, with casual gamers playing against their friends and partners, hardcore gamers stringing together difficult combos, and one tournament organised towards the end of my research period. As Eve put it, the game’s widespread popularity and presence in most game centres meant that "If you're Ghanaian, you have to play Mortal Kombat."[163] Its format of short one-versus-one matches is particularly well-suited to the social play at game centres. Players can take turns, stepping in when somebody else is defeated.[164] Additionally, as individual matches are short, players can pay very little to play a handful of matches, or spend more money to string together larger sessions - something I observed a few times with players entering the game centre, playing for ten minutes, leaving, and returning later to play more.

Perceptive readers may notice that, despite the statistical popularity of mobile games (discussed in chapter 3), I have not mentioned any here. Interestingly, when discussing popular games with my interlocutors, mobile games rarely came up. While data regarding mobile games’ performance across Africa exists,[165] and largely reflects global patterns, they were of little relevance to most of my interlocutors. This likely hints at mobile games being considered “more casual” and less legitimate, a common global pattern.[166] This again highlights how gamers’ values and tastes are globally connected.

5.5 “It’s a Way to Give Back to the Community:” Game Centres

In his description of African games culture, Kirinya further mentions that many of the social activities of gaming take place at internet cafés, with groups of players watching and thereby passively playing along.[167] While the culture has shifted in the decade since he wrote his chapter, these spaces, known as centres, lounges, cafés, parlours, among other terms remain important hubs in the gaming landscape of Accra. They offer their customers a hassle-free gaming experience, with customers paying a small (usually hourly) fee for access to a variety of devices. Throughout this thesis I use the term game centre for consistency's sake.

These centres do not differ notably from their counterparts - known under various similar terms - which were/are common throughout most of the non-Western gaming landscape. Schleiner notes that in most of the West the rise of popular computers and consoles moved gaming from the public space to the home. In other parts of the world, she argues, spatial factors maintain the centres' popularity, offering an independent space away from the home for youths who often live with their parents up until marriage.[168] Additionally, these spaces create deep bonds between players, allowing them to stay in touch with their friends and to make new ones.[169] Malik described how when he was younger, one of his neighbours ran a small game centre - he owned a TV and a PlayStation where the neighbourhood boys would come together after school and play, paying a few cedis. Other interlocutors shared similar

[162] I am uncertain if this is because my interlocutors were not aware of them or they did not happen. This could prove interesting for further analysis, as it may help illustrate the popular perception of games and gamers.
[163] Eve, Personal Conversation, 28 October 2024.
[164] Kirinya, ‘Africa’, 25.
[165] Maliyo Games, ‘2025 Africa Games Industry Report’, 21.
[166] Often this includes a gendered lens where women are seen as engaging in casual mobile gaming and men in more serious hardcore gaming, see Richardson, Hjorth, and Davies, *Understanding Games and Game Cultures*, 162.
[167] Kirinya, ‘Africa’, 25.
[168] Schleiner, *Transnational Play*, 50–52.
[169] Phan Quang Anh, ‘Shifting the Focus to East and Southeast Asia: A Critical Review of Regional Game Research’, *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 14, no. 2 (June 2021): 185, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-021-00317-7; Snodgrass et al., ‘Indian Gaming Zones as Oppositional Subculture’, 776–79.

stories, such as Arthur’s statement (already quoted above) that parents would usually find their children either at the neighbourhood’s football field, or its game centre.

The informal nature of these (often in-home) centres means that they disappeared rapidly. Malik's neighbour had stopped hosting people shortly after him and many of the boys in the neighbourhood moved away to attend boarding school. With the rise of smartphone usage and accessibility, these small-scale centres seem to have largely disappeared, with some interlocutors mentioning they hadn't seen any since their childhood and teenage years. While anecdotal, they traced this development to children and teenagers being able to play from home on their phones rather than having to go out and spend money.

Larger, more formalised game centres continue to exist in a small number across Accra. They have maintained relevance thanks to competitive play and esports as they allow players to meet and compete against their peers in-person, thereby avoiding the barriers of expensive and slow internet connections which come with online play. This makes playing at game centres appealing even for the wealthier gamers who own their own consoles. As I have noted above, esports organiser Crystal had decided that regularly playing at centres was both more economical, and allowed her to improve her skills more, than playing from home. The presence of a large number of consoles, screens, and seating further means that most the infrastructure necessary for organized competitions is already present. Because of this, most tournaments are hosted at, or by, game centres. One notable example of this was Ghana’s national EAFC24 Championship, whose organisers had partnered with game centres in every region of Ghana to organize regional qualifiers and ensure the infrastructure was available.

Early in my research stay, I was able to attend the opening tournament of a newly opened centre located in one of Accra's informal suburban settlements, considered a high-poverty area by the city's municipal services. The venue consisted of one room filled with couches, PlayStations, and TV screens, arranged in such a way as to fit as many as possible into the limited space. Utilising Schleiner's "unsolicited digital ethnography"[170] in the same context as her and looking at publicly available pictures and videos of game centres in other Ghanaian cities like Kumasi shows that those centres follow the same setup. An AC unit, a fridge stocked with cans of soft drinks, and a small counter for the employee filled the rest of the space, with coloured LEDs and pictures of popular footballers Kylian Mbappe and Erling Haaland adding some decoration. This functional approach differed from the more upscale centres I visited, which were located more centrally in richer areas of Accra. These venues offer more space, privacy in VIP lounges, and a wider choice of refreshments, ranging from drinks and snacks to, in one location, a fully staffed kitchen offering burgers, fries, and wagyu steaks. Next to the PlayStation 4 and 5s also available at the smaller centres, they are equipped with high-end desktop PCs (marketed as Esports machines), Nintendo consoles, and in one case, Virtual Reality and high-tech racing simulator machine setups, all specialised (and expensive) devices.

As one interlocutor lamented during a casual conversation, the upscale centres are largely inaccessible to many of Accra’s gamers. Their high prices (two to four times that of the smaller centres I visited) make them financially unviable to many gamers. Additionally, they are also physically inaccessible due to their location in rich neighbourhoods with no *trotro* stops nearby, requiring either a car or a taxi/rideshare to access. This leads to a class disparity in the centres’ clientele, something Milimu also encountered in Nairobi where there was little interaction between the gamers of the poorer Eastlands and the wealthier crowd of the city’s more upscale gaming spaces.[171]

[170] Schleiner, *Transnational Play*, 49.
[171] Milimu, ‘Playing Offside’, 140.

Game centres best highlight the autonomy of Accra’s gamer subculture. The owners of game centres and the organisers who organise tournaments are themselves gamers and provide their services not just for commercial gain, but also as a service to their community. Eric Ackorn, an event organisers and game centre owner described his primary motivation for running events as “giving back to the community.”[172] Additionally, game centres and their owners also play a key role in advocating for the community and educating outsiders, primarily through parent outreach. Richard described how a sizeable part of his job was working with his customers' parents. A key part of this, according to him, was educating parents on the differences between gaming and gambling and showing how digital games were less harmful. As part of this, he worked to show parents that games could also be used as incentives; creating a "pay for grades" system where students' good grades would earn them free playtime - an approach I also heard mentioned some other times. Beyond creating an incentive for the students, this showed the parents that there was no dichotomy between being a "truant" gamer or a diligent student, but that the two could be combined productively. I noticed that one game centre I visited listed “no school uniforms” as its first house rule, likely as part of this type of (parent) outreach. To passers-by, seeing many students spending their time at the centre would likely reinforce the stereotype of game centres as spaces for truant students who are more interested in entertainment than their own education. Avoiding this would hopefully prevent the centre from getting a negative reputation. It would also complicate sneaky after-school visits like some of my interlocutors had talked about doing in their youth, which would ideally prevent parents’ negative feelings towards the centres and their owners. Lastly, this policy probably helped to avoid creating visible distinctions between the students and those who were not in education for one reason or another, which would in turn prevent disparagement from either group towards the other.

5.6 “It’s About Job Creation and Economic Growth:” Gaming and Accra’s Educational Landscape

Educating parents and wider society is not limited to those working for game centres, but something many people inside Accra’s gamer subculture are actively involved in, working towards hopefully breaking the stigma against their hobby. One key way in which this happens is through game developers and esports organisers conducting tours and visits to high schools and universities, which, I argue, themselves are important spaces in Accra’s gaming landscape.

In our interview, Xhaq described how "once a Ghanaian streamer makes millions, this will take off"[173] - arguing that once gaming would become considered as an economically viable activity, the stigma against it would disappear and parents would be much happier to have their children involved in it, akin to music and films. Following this mindset, a sizeable part of game developers and esports organisers' educational activities in high schools, universities, guest talks, and interactions with parents, related to the economic opportunities which a developed local games industry may provide. By giving tangible examples of their work and their pathway towards their job, these game developers argued, they could inspire students with an additional potential career path many may not have thought was possible in Ghana. As they also noted, both the pathways into the games industry, and the skills one gained from it, were diverse and opened many opportunities; with Eyram Tawia noting how the interns at Leti Arts included backgrounds as diverse as lawyers.

Beyond inspiring students and showing them more potential career paths, these efforts aim to legitimise the games industry as an “acceptable” career path with parents and students. Many of the

[172] Tawia et al., ‘The Impact of Esports and Game Development under STEAM Education’.
[173] Xhaq, Interview, 31 October 2024.

game developers I talked to noted how they had pursued an education in computer science, graphic design, or similar degrees to satisfy their parents’ demands for a serious job while building the skillset to then join the games industry as a hobbyist or professional. J.J. described how, when he was the teaching assistant for a programming class, he deliberately showed how the skills he was teaching could be applied in game development because "that's what I felt was useful and fun."[174] Many students, he noted, felt forced to go to university and did not know what they wanted to do in the future, so highlighting the Gaming sector would allow them to explore additional possibilities.

Similarly, esports organisers and influencers organised visits in which they talked about the career possibilities of esports and adjacent fields like livestreaming. In this, they would often stress how "this is about more than gaming - it's about job creation and economic growth",[175] noting how the recent growth in esports had created more opportunities for travel and employment for everyday people than had been around previously. These efforts, however, were met with more scepticism even from people inside the community. As Sage noted, while the skills one learned as a game developer were applicable to other “acceptable” career paths, this did not really extend to the skillset one acquired from playing and livestreaming games, which would probably make schools less eager to promote it “unless you told them you are making a lot of money from playing.”[176]

Beyond serving as a recruiting ground for the local games industry, high schools and universities serve as important spaces of interaction for young gamers. Universities and their residential hostels in particular serve as meeting grounds, where players can meet likeminded peers and play in an environment without any supervision (likely for the first time). As I noted above, many of my interlocutors (and other gamers) chose to study computer science and adjacent degrees, which led to them quickly bonding with classmates over their shared hobby. Xhaq noted how in the residential hostels, friends would swap games among one another and organise gaming sessions. One person would bring their console, another a new game, somebody else hardware like screens and controllers. This sharing of resources built close-knit friendships among the students, and in some cases developed further into formal esports team structures. Some of my interlocutors described having been part of university EAFC teams, which would then compete against one another, against other teams, and against their counterparts from other universities. While I could not gather how organised these activities were, esports organisers noted how a Ghanaian "University Esports Championship" was something they had been pursuing for some time. In this structure, they hoped, teams from universities throughout the country would compete for notable prizes. This would hopefully help legitimise esports beyond the (sub)culture of gaming.

While universities create close-knit friendships among gamers, these are often short lived. Following graduation, the Ghanaian government mandates all Ghanaian tertiary education graduates complete one year of national service, generally referred to as NSS.[177] NSS was mentioned as a notable point of rupture for the gamers who had just graduated university, as close-knit friend groups were scattered across the country. One interlocutor described how one of his best friends had been posted in a rural area without regular internet access. This meant they could not even play together online, and even after his friend returned, both had moved on and no longer regularly played games. Coming at the same time as the move into "serious" employed life and expectations of job performance and starting a family, the disruption presented by NSS often leads to gamers fully disconnecting from gaming

[174] J.J., Interview, 29 October 2024.
[175] ‘The Future of Esports - Exploring the Rise of Competitive Gaming and Its Impact on Traditional Sport.’ (Africa Basketball Festival Innovation and Entertainment Summit 2024, Accra, 24 October 2024).
[176] Sage, Interview, 1 December 2024.
[177] Corresponding to the abbreviation for the agency in charge of the scheme, the National Service Secretariat.

(sub)culture. As a mandated period of work, NSS serves as a transitional period between childhood and social adulthood. For those that can follow it up with further employment (such as both gamers above), this means avoiding the situation of waithood I described earlier, which makes commitment to gamer subculture less available and less attractive.

5.7 “A lot of the people here, you would also see there:” Conventions, Parties, and Other Social Events

Beyond meeting for play sessions at game centres, Accra's community of digital game players hosts different types of in-person events for the community to come together, meet each other, and play against one-another. These take the shape of both one-off, and regularly recurring, events - some with more focus on playing games – some more social. Often these events take inspiration from existing events like Comic-Cons and the fighting game tournament EVO. These events, like their international counterparts, bring together various "nerd" communities of people who enjoy gaming, comics, anime, TV shows and adjacent hobbies, and allow local practitioners and audience members to connect.[178] Beyond networking, conventions usually include an economic aspect, further highlighting the subculture’s autonomy by offering space for vendors to sell merchandise and artwork they either imported or made themselves.

Event organiser Bryan explained how he had moved from organizing esports events towards selling video game and anime merchandise as it had proven more economically viable. His stand, set up at one event, sold necklaces, prints, and other small merchandise of popular video game and anime franchises, as well as accessories for mobile gaming. However, sales were rare, and he noted how thanks to inflation and his business being reliant on importing the goods he was selling, there was little money in selling merchandise at events.

One notable event I attended, and which I also describe in the introduction to this chapter, was Spawn Camp Fire (SCF). The SCF parties are intended primarily as a way for gamers in Accra to connect and get to know each other. As organiser Sebastian Ebhohimen describes, his hope is that beyond organising events, the connections people make during them can foster a "culture that celebrates the things we’re passionate about."[179] This, he mentioned in a conversation, is not just limited to the consumer/play side of games culture, but also towards connecting creatives and helping people get involved in game development in order to also foster local game development, similar to the intent behind the university tours. Correspondingly, events like SCF (the iteration I attended was hosted at the Leti Arts office) allow local game developers to meet with local gamers and market their games to them directly, with characters from Leti's games decorating the entire event. The importance of the Nairobi Comic Convention (organised since 2014) for Kenya's gaming landscape highlights the potential events like SCF have towards connecting and fostering in-person communities. [180] Beyond gaming, attendees of SCF connected through their shared interests like anime and science fiction. Through SCF I also met various organisers of similar events, some more focused on targeting creatives, or lovers of anime, or cosplayers, further highlighting the connection between these interests. Additionally, it showed how event organisers in Accra were connected with one-another. When I met Bryan again at a tournament a month after SCF, he mentioned that he had rescheduled one of the events he organises as it would have

[178] Callus and Potter, ‘Michezo Video’, 316.
[179] Osemudiamen Sebastian Ebhohimen, ‘Passion Built This Very House.’, Substack newsletter, *The Present & The Future* (blog), 29 October 2024, https://osemuix.substack.com/p/passion-built-this-very-house.
[180] Callus and Potter, ‘Michezo Video’, 316.

clashed with the tournament we were at, noting that “a lot of the people you see here you would also see there.”[181]

Ehobhimen’s aim of fostering the local culture highlights how members of the subcommunity work to create and provide (social) spaces for their peers. In a context which is marked, as I have described above, by the challenges of social marginalisation and general uncertainty, those in positions of (relative) stability hope to support their peers by enabling them access to opportunities they may otherwise be unable to access. They take inspiration from the structure of global events and use similar parlance. This strategy allows them to draw on the name recognition and established know-how associated with such structures, reducing the barriers towards recognition (while probably raising attendee’s expectations). Additionally, the international name recognition means that the organisers’ efforts help gain recognition of the African gamer/nerd community on a global stage, as those abroad become aware of its existence and participation in the loose global network of conventions. As such, these events both help create local spaces for likeminded peers, and work towards international recognition by the gamer community and beyond.

5.8 “He had been on a Server with Me for Years, We just Never Interacted:” Digital Spaces

When I set out my research, I had originally intended to also focus on online gaming spaces like Discord chat rooms,[182] Facebook groups, and online communities. Exploratory research during my proposal writing process revealed some activity on social media and put me in touch with some future interlocutors. However, when I pursued these leads more actively during my research period, I primarily encountered abandoned spaces - Discord servers which had only seen the occasional bot message over the past year and Facebook groups which appeared to only serve to repost YouTube videos with 10 views. I was invited to one recently-opened, semi-public Discord server by an interlocutor, however activity was limited there too, and largely constrained to a closed-access voice channel, which would have significantly further complicated analysis.

Discussing this lack of online activity with some interlocutors, many mentioned WhatsApp, where they communicated with their friends through person-to-person private messages, and occasionally, through group chats which were more active than the Discord chats. Notably, WhatsApp requires other participants' phone numbers and generally is a closed system, whereas Discord chats often are more accessible and anonymous. This led to me wondering about why they preferred the more generalist WhatsApp over the dedicated, targeted-towards-gamers Discord. Next to the ubiquity of WhatsApp, one possibility, noted as quite likely by the interlocutors I discussed it with, were the associated data costs of either platform. Discord meant opening a separate platform, with associated costs, dedicated to a specific topic. This meant logging in, seeing no new activity, and then logging out to save data, thereby limiting the potential for spontaneous interaction. WhatsApp, which most people ran in the background regardless of chat activity in order to be reachable by their family and friends, would not require additional attention or data, thereby being a more attractive platform.

As I noted above, communities within online games sometimes developed into close friendships. While less intense than Malik having access to his friend’s Facebook account, some of the Mobile Legends: Bang Bang players I interacted with had met, and interacted with, fellow players from Ghana and nearby countries online. Unlike Malik’s case however, these interactions were primarily on irregular and personal bases rather than through being part of a central common dedicated community. In some

[181] Bryan, Personal conversation, 23 November 2024.
[182] A messaging app popular with, and designed for, gamers.

cases, these initially irregular interactions would however develop into more structured friendships, also through the avenues of esports I discuss in more detail in chapter 6. Similarly, Sage described how he had met some of his current friends through online games originally and then decided to meet up with them in-person later. This included, as he learned, a colleague at his work, who "had been on a server with me for years, we just never interacted beforehand."[183]

Throughout this chapter, I have sought to explain the factors which shape Accra’s gamer subculture and the social and physical spaces of gaming throughout the city. Drawing on indicators of subcultural participation, I link gamers’ tastes and identity to a negotiation of local factors with global imaginings of what it means to be a “true” gamer. Local factors are most visible in the ways that participation in gamer subculture can be read, as I argue, as a reaction to the common situation of waithood which is shaped by the increasing availability of digital communications. Despite this availability however, dedicated online spaces remain rare, most digital interaction appears to be one-on-one. Beyond describing the gaming landscape of the city, I also highlight how many members of the community, particularly those with financial involvement like organisers and developers, are involved in educational efforts, both to help legitimise gaming as a valid hobby and career path, and to recruit more members. These efforts also serve the local community by creating the space for interaction and by building recognition both domestically and globally through drawing on the language of the global gamer subculture and entering Accra – as a location and community – into it.

[183] Sage, Interview, 1 December 2024.

6 “Once the Authorities see it there, they will start to invest”: Accra’s Games Industry Professionals

As we were waiting for the next set of games to start, the team members and the organisers were talking about future plans; this current league structure would be over in a few weeks, but there already were plans for a follow-up league, to help build the Ghanaian community and get people ready for next year's circuit of international tournaments. Ideally, Ghana would be able to compete on some of esports' biggest international stages in yet another game; Mobile Legends: Bang Bang. Of course, this sort of planning also meant discussing who could be invited to attend, with the players knowing most members of the relatively small Ghanaian community. Due to the tournament rules mandating at least two women per team, as well as plans for an all-women's team, the conversation quickly shifted to discussing what other women would be interested, and one name came up again and again: one of Ghana's most promising upcoming players, who had already played online with some of the people on the current team, and conveniently also lived here in the Greater Accra Region.

Unfortunately for the team, she was still underage and lived with her parents, who were wary of letting their daughter attend these "events" by herself. Aaron, one of the organisers and also a player himself, mentioned that he had already talked with her parents once, and would talk to them again together with the players in order to try and convince them to let her attend - while I did not catch his strategy for this, he would likely point out the community of the other players, the sponsorship opportunities, and his own travels to Bali, when he had been invited to attend a tournament. While I did not hear how this discussion went, I did quickly meet her when she came to spectate the final leg of the league.

To a small group of people within Accra’s gaming landscape, gaming activities expand to economic opportunities and employment. Rather than engaging with games as entertainment, their interaction is one driven – at least in parts – by a financial motive. In this chapter, I discuss the two most prominent instances of this, game developers creating their own games, and esports athletes competing for notable amounts of prize money in events primarily organised by local organisers. I analyse how Accra's gaming industry is structured locally and connects to the global ecosystem of gaming. Elaborating on these connections, I analyse how Accra’s professionals are situated in the global gaming ecosystem and how they work to increase the role of Ghana, and Africa as a whole, within it. These efforts, as well as ones regarding recognition and support on a local scale, I argue, are central to the experience of professional involvement with gaming in Accra.

6.1 “The Developers are Native Ghanaians, not just Expats who set up Shop Here”: Game Developers’ Domestic and International Connections

In terms of game development, Accra is most notable as the main home of Leti Arts, one of Africa’s first and longest-active professional game development studios.[184] The history and current state of the city’s game development scene are well documented, in large parts thanks to the attention which Leti Arts has received from scholars and journalists, as well as its own efforts, primarily through the work of its founder Eyram Tawia. In his semi-autobiographical *Uncompromising Passion: The Humble*

[184] The most recent African Games Industry report lists 3 other professional studios in the city. During my research I also learned of various developers working on games as hobbyists or for non-gaming organisations. See Maliyo Games, ‘2025 Africa Games Industry Report’.

Beginnings of an African Video Games Industry,[185] he highlights his path towards a becoming a game developer. Despite the generational gap between him and many of my interlocutors, his story remains emblematic for that of many of the game developers I met throughout my research.

Pijnaker and Spronk describe how Tawia’s story reflects that of Ghana's "young upper middle-class [...] who were the first to become tech entrepreneurs in the 2000s and owned technology start-ups, or worked for one."[186] Their parents had often been educated abroad, giving them access to transnational networks, and either worked in high-status corporate jobs or in higher education, such as Tawia’s father who worked as a lecturer at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology.[187] In these transnational environments, the future entrepreneurs had access to foreign media such as superhero comics and videogames, while the corporate and academic setting also made their parents early adopters of computers and the internet. This internet access enabled them access to online learning, allowing them to progress beyond what the often-underfunded universities could offer. This skillset enabled access to funding by international NGOs and corporations, aiming to establish a dedicated Ghanaian technology industry.[188] This experience appears shared with their counterparts from Kenya, where developers described the same pathway of informal networks, overseas connections, and autodidactic training through online sources.[189] This connection is particularly relevant for Leti Arts, which was founded as a Ghanaian-Kenyan coproduction between Tawia and Wesley Kirinya, whom he met over the internet, with funding by the Meltwater Foundation, a technology training and seed fund organisation.[190]

Despite the rapid growth of Accra’s technology sector, internet access, and mobile phone ownership, many of the game developers I interacted with had followed a similar path to that of Tawia. An early interest in games made them want to learn how they worked. This desire, together with, as some pointed out, the skillset one naturally acquired when trying to install pirated games, led to them pursuing formal programming courses or autodidactically learning through online programming tutorials. Here, one of the most notable developments is visible: Accessing foreign media has become much easier and no longer relies on a personal network of international connections. While internet access remains costly, (specialised) online learning has expanded massively in both scope and accessibility in the years since the generation of Kirinya and Tawia had to gather their knowledge from scattered websites.[191] This has opened the space beyond the upper middle-class, while improved and specialized secondary school and university courses, such as most prominently Ashesi University's game development course offered in collaboration with Tawia,[192] have enhanced the formal education opportunities.

Notably, with Asheshi University’s course and offers like Nigeria-based Maliyo Games' GameUp Africa program,[193] aspiring game developers in Ghana have access to previously unavailable, Africa-based formal game development training and mentorship. GameUp Africa's mentorship program is part of the larger, well-connected international network of African developers connecting studios,

[185] Eyram Tawia, *Uncompromising Passion: The Humble Beginnings of an African Video Game Industry* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016).
[186] Pijnaker and Spronk, ‘Africa’s Legends’, 333.
[187] Tawia, *Uncompromising Passion*, 11.
[188] Pijnaker and Spronk, ‘Africa’s Legends’, 334–37.
[189] Callus and Potter, ‘Michezo Video’, 306.
[190] Tawia, *Uncompromising Passion*, 69–73.
[191] Callus and Potter, ‘Michezo Video’, 306.
[192] ‘Eyram Tawia’, Ashesi University Faculty, 23 April 2025, https://ashesi.edu.gh/?post_type=faculty-profile&p=33793.
[193] Maliyo Games, ‘About Us’, GameUp Africa, accessed 28 April 2025, https://gameupafrica.com/about-us/.

developers, and interns across the continent. Organisations like the Gamers Association Ghana,[194] Pan Africa Gaming Group,[195] local chapters of the International Game Developers Association, and developer communities on social media like Discord and WhatsApp create a vibrant online ecosystem which allows peers from across the continent and beyond to connect and support one-another. While the activity of specific organisations appears to wave and wane across the years, the personal networks are strong, with developers regularly in contact with one-another. In this way, African game developers can be read as their own, largely digital subculture.

As my friend Kax pointed out during a conversation, “the developers are native Ghanaians, not just expats who set up shop here:”[196] Accra’s game development industry is almost entirely domestic, made up of locally trained Ghanaians rather than expats or people educated abroad. All the formally educated developers I interacted with during my stay in Accra had graduated from a Ghanaian university, complementing their education with skills learned autodidactically from online programming tutorials and figuring out how to safely pirate games. Many had pursued a formal university degree in computer engineering or associated degrees even when specifically aiming to become a game developer, both to open more job opportunities and critically, to satisfy their parents' demands for a serious career path, as I have described in chapter 5. Correspondingly, J.J. noted that most the game developers he knew worked as software developers or graphic designers and developed games as a hobby, as making a living from game development (as he himself did, after having pursued one of Maliyo's training bootcamps) was rare. This matches the data of the recent Africa Games Industry Survey, where 53% of respondents indicated not receiving any income from their development activities.[197] Interestingly, only a third of survey respondents had participated in a game development support program like GameUp Africa, highlighting further potential for these programs’ expansion.

6.2 “None of It is Going to Us, it’s All Going to Candy Crush and Clash of Clans”: Structures of Game Development Funding

As mentioned above, Leti Arts was started with funding by the non-profit Meltwater Foundation. In this it is also emblematic for much of the Ghanaian and African games industry, which largely remains reliant on (foreign) funding. While Nigeria, Morocco and South Africa have recently started programs targeted towards supporting the industry, government funding remains exceedingly rare, with only 3% of Africa Games Industry Survey respondents having received any.[198] While smaller hobbyist productions may be paid with personal income, larger productions' upfront costs require outside funding. In their 2013 presentation, Tawia and Kirinya noted how most developers made money developing customs games commissioned by companies.[199] A large part of these commissions come from Western donors like NGOs and government development agencies, which Tawia noted remains the common funding structure for most game developers across the continent at a presentation I attended during my stay in Accra. Arthur, an independent developer, noted his frustration at this structure. An educational game proposal he had been working on had been "stuck with the Ghanaian team who are probably too old to understand but don't want to admit that"[200] of an international funder for months and across

[194] Gamers Association Ghana, ‘Introducing Gamer’s Association Ghana (GAG) — Advancing Game Development in Ghana’, Medium, 10 October 2022, https://medium.com/@gamersassociationghana/introducing-gamers-association-ghana-gag-5757f71033eb.
[195] ‘Unlocking the Worlds’ next 1 Billion Players, Together’, Pan Africa Gaming Group, 2 September 2024, https://pagg.group/.
[196] Kax, Online communication, 4 April 2025.
[197] Maliyo Games, ‘2025 Africa Games Industry Report’, 54–55.
[198] Maliyo Games, 38.
[199] Kirinya and Tawia, ‘GDC 2013’, 10:50.
[200] Arthur, Personal conversation, 17 September 2024.

multiple follow-ups. His frustration further highlights how the structure limits the creativity and agency of even small-scale developers, who rather than thinking about how to make a game entertaining and educational, have to think about how to pitch it to an - often uninterested - third party in order to finance their development efforts. At the same time, he noted that he was working on a marketing campaign – largely through visiting universities – which he hoped would mean “once the authorities see it there, they will start to invest,”[201] and allow him to obtain the sort of government support other African game developers were slowly beginning to receive. This aspiration of (domestic) financial support is common for many, smaller-scale professionals. It would allow them to not only work on their products full-time but also acknowledge them as legitimate and serious enough to receive official government support, thereby proving that the industry deserves to be taken seriously.

The internationally-focused funding structure resembles similar structures in South and South-east Asia and Latin America, where developers historically relied on – or continue to rely on - localisation and outsourcing work to fund their own games.[202] While some developers and academics have pointed at this system as a way to build capacities and capital for kickstarting an independent games industry,[203] others are more critical. They question this modernisation development-inspired template which reinforces unequal global power structures by keeping high-level decision making in the Global North. Instead, they suggest, games industries should focus on localised approaches based on encouraging mentorship, enthusiasm for games, and pride in local cultural heritage.[204] Notably, these suggestions appear to be what programs like GameUp Africa are pursuing.

Beyond the high costs of game development, the reliance on foreign funding relates to the games developed by African studios rarely earning enough money to support future development efforts, an issue noted by most game developers I interacted with. As one developer pointed out "of the 41 million US$ Ghanaians spend on games every year none of it is going to us; it's all going to Candy Crush and Clash of Clans." Beyond domestic audiences not engaging with African-developed games as I have described in chapter 4, some developers linked this lack of spending to piracy being common in African games culture, arguing that "If people don't get into the habit of paying for games, we can't expect them to buy the games we make."[205]

Consumer spending flowing out of the country, while developers rely on foreign money – often in the form of development aid – in order to survive highlights both Ghana’s role within the gaming ecosystem, and the tensions at the core of it. Developers must adjust their workflow and games to the tastes and expectations of funders, or work with money left over from those projects. This often leads to a focus on serious games, which as I have described in chapter 4, makes both those games, but also others produced by the same developer, less attractive to domestic players. Those players’ play and taste in games is, in turn, shaped by foreign productions. Between the time and money they invest in those games and their often higher production value, this continues the cycle of players choosing not to engage with locally developed games.

[201] Arthur, Personal conversation, 17 September 2024.
[202] Mukherjee, *Videogames in the Indian Subcontinent*, 59–62; Schleiner, *Transnational Play*, 144–49; Penix-Tadsen, *Cultural Code*, 133.
[203] Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, 1. ed (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 185–88; Mukherjee, *Videogames in the Indian Subcontinent*, 61; Terence Tan, ‘Exploring Game Development in South-East Asia’, Game Developer, 20 April 2005, https://www.gamedeveloper.com/business/exploring-game-development-in-south-east-asia.
[204] Schleiner, *Transnational Play*, 157.
[205] Personal Conversation, September 2024.

6.3 “At some Point, we Want to Bring in Players from Other Countries:” Esports Competitions

Most of the esports events I attended throughout my stay in Accra were organised through the nodal point of the Esports Association, Ghana, one of a small number of esports organisations which are active throughout all of Ghana. Beyond being a national body, the organisation is also linked to the international esports ecosystem through membership in African and global esports networks,[206] highlighting the international nature of the community. Parties interested in hosting an esports event, either independently or as part of a larger event, would contact an organiser - usually the Association - who would in turn handle the infrastructure and promotion of the event. Some of these events were primarily entertainment-based, allowing walk-in players to enjoy games on the consoles as part of store openings or conferences, while others were competitive tournaments, usually with registered spots, entry fees, and notable prizes.

These competitive tournaments required additional effort and considerations, many of which the organisers openly discussed in conversations with me and in presentations and podcasts I listened to. Infrastructural issues like power outages and internet connectivity, common frustrations for most players, as I noted in chapter 3, remain notable problems for both in-person and online events. Other issues, such as managing sponsors’ expectations, were specific to the structure of esports. Organisers were quick to mention that players being late - so common it was fully expected - presented an issue when sponsors required a specific schedule, such as with livestreams or as part of specific, larger events. Some organisers noted how they would announce an official start time hours ahead of the intended start time with the hope of players then being on time; something that - they added - rarely worked. Another problem, particularly for online play, was verifying players' identity. Players had previously signed up for tournaments under multiple names, or taken over a friend's account, to have a higher chance to win. Similarly, while obviously hard to prove, some organisers frustratedly suggested that match-fixing was a regular problem as many of the players knew each other well and they would determine a winner ahead of the tournament, splitting the earnings afterwards.

Most tournaments I attended drew from the same communities of established players, connected with one another as a community of peers and friends, and through their (formally recognised) esports teams. While mainly locals of the Greater Accra area, some more prestigious tournaments included players who had travelled from Kumasi and the Volta region (approximately four to six hours of travel) to attend. The demographics of attendees reflected that of the respective games played in the competitions. Reflecting its dominant role in Accra’s games culture, EAFC has by far the biggest and most organised competitive scene. At these tournaments, most the players were men between 16 and 25 years old. Most were either in education or had recently graduated from university. This group most closely resembles the stereotypical hardcore gamer who can dedicate much of his time towards mastering one specific game and competing for money. As a result, once this level of commitment is no longer possible, they are likely to stop competing. One former competitive EAFC player told me he had stopped playing competitively after graduating as work and volunteering commitments took up most of his time and he could no longer keep up with other competitive players. Outside of one tournament I attended, all the competitors were men - my interlocutor Acinelle being the only woman at the other tournament, and according to herself one of only a handful of female competitive EAFC players in Ghana. While this highlights that women are a small subsection of the overall esports scene, some organisers I interacted with mentioned activities and tournaments specifically aimed at increasing women's participation in the hobby. Beyond making the space more inclusive and reaching a larger audience,

[206] ‘Home’, Esports Association, Ghana, accessed 14 April 2025, https://ghanaesports.com/.

some organisers noted that this also had a financial background: empowering women in an overwhelmingly masculine space was attractive for funders and made it easier to attract outside funding and sponsors than organising events and activities for male players did.

Along these lines, the Mobile Legends: Bang Bang tournaments I attended were deliberately mixed gender, with the tournament rules requiring at least two women on each team. This rule appeared to be tournament specific rather than linked to rules set by an international governing body such as the International Esports Federation (IESF),[207] serving to promote women’s role in the game. These tournaments were organised as a collaboration between Accra's Filipino community and the Esports Association, Ghana. While Mobile Legends is incredibly popular in the Philippines and among expats, it is a relatively niche - albeit growing - game in Ghana. Correspondingly, most of the players were Filipino expats with some of the game's top Ghanaian players invited to participate. Similar to the EAFC players described above, the Ghanaian players were young adults in, or just finished with, education, while the Filipino players had a larger range of age and employment.

Many organisers had aspirations of expanding their tournament activities. During one discussion, Bryan mentioned how in Nigeria, events would fill entire stadiums, something he hoped to reproduce in Ghana eventually. John described how some of his event’s players had recently been invited to a tournament abroad, and how he hoped that soon “we want to bring in players from other countries”[208] too. He noted how he had connections to the communities in some neighbouring countries. However, he continued, the infrastructure, cost, and bureaucracy of international travel presented hurdles which first needed to be solved.

Figure 7: Playing and waiting at a Mortal Kombat tournament, Picture taken by author

[207] International Esports Federation, ‘Rules & Regulations’, IESF, accessed 2 June 2025, https://iesf.org/rules-regulations/.
[208] John, Personal conversation, 23 November 2024.

6.4 “It Shows that Gamers can Compete for Medals Under their Country’s Flag:” Esports Funding and Aspirations of “Going Pro”

Akin to organisers’ hopes of expanding their events, many of my interlocutors involved in esports hoped to “go pro” – to be able to fully fund their lifestyle through esports. Unlike the Udaipuri gamers interviewed by Snodgrass *et al.* who also often dreamed of this,[209] the Ghanaian gamers had slightly better prospects thanks to being located not just in the country's capital, but also one of the continent's tech hubs. They would not necessarily have to look abroad for opportunities - although the financial prospects likely remain quite limited. Notably, both players and promoters were quick to discuss international travel and competitions. Players and organisers excitedly mentioned how they had been invited to travel to the World Esports Championship in Bali, DreamHack in Sweden, and other tournaments to compete. The hope to “go pro” can be read as an attempt at seizing the opportunity of the international esports system to find a solution to the (marginal) socioeconomic position the players find themselves in, as a way to navigate (out of) a situation of waithood.[210] As many interlocutors pointed out (see chapter 5), esports presented a new opportunity to reach financial independence and stability.

In Accra’s esports scene, money is chiefly linked to one’s performance at tournaments. Most tournaments’ prize pools appeared to consist primarily of the participants’ entry fees, which after paying for the tournament expenses, would be redistributed to the event winners. Other times, the prize money came primarily from the event hosts and sponsors, who usually treated esports events as a marketing opportunity. As I described in chapter 5, some organisers also quoted the desire to “give back to the community” – both by offering opportunities to play and compete, but also in a very material sense by sponsoring prize money. The prizes for winning an event ranged in the 300-to-2000-cedi range; while there are limited sources measuring average wages in Accra, these payments represented a notable potential source of income for many of the players who were students or (often unemployed) recent university graduates.

However, as these winnings are tied to tournament performance, and non-winning placements often mean significantly reduced to no prizes, these irregular earnings cannot be considered a stable income. I learned of one internationally active Call of Duty: Mobile player, a student at a local university, whose contract with his esports team included a regular monthly payment of 40 US$[211] - enough that it can be considered a (part-time) job. Teams, sometimes "clans" in line with subcultural terminology, appear to be regular fixtures in Accra's esports environment, with most players I met at tournaments being under contract at a team. Most interlocutors however did not mention receiving regular payments as part of their team memberships. Notably, some highlighted that their contract included being given a PlayStation 5 to practice at home. Given the console’s high price, beyond many of the players’ economic capacities, this not only is a major investment by the respective teams, but also a way in which players who otherwise could not afford an at-home console can gain access to one. As such, while these teams cannot provide regular payments, the console creates a significant economic bond between the team and its players and gives players an economic incentive to join a team, practice, and maintain their performance.

My research and conversations with interlocutors did not yield any notable insights into the origin of the money paid to teams and players. Akin to tournament prize-pools, most appeared to either

[209] Snodgrass et al., ‘Indian Gaming Zones as Oppositional Subculture’, 778.
[210] Honwana, *The Time of Youth*, 87.
[211] During the presentation the amount was given in US$, as such I am uncertain if he is paid in dollars or an equivalent amount of cedis.

be community-funded or paid for by wealthy individual sponsors; often the same people also involved in tournaments. Sponsorship deals with established (foreign) organisations in the video games and esports industry like in Kenya as described by Callus and Potter,[212] were limited to some hardware sponsoring. It may be interesting to investigate the financial side of esports in Accra more thoroughly in the future to gain a better understanding of the funders and their motivations.

While money, and the hope to “go pro” were personal aspirations, legitimacy and recognition among the Ghanaian public, whether implicitly or explicitly, would come from being paid to travel abroad and represent Ghana on the international stage. This was particularly relevant in the case of the inaugural African Esports Championship hosted in Morocco in 2024,[213] and the World Esports Championship, a worldwide, yearly tournament most recently hosted in Saudi Arabia.[214] At both events, players did not just represent a Ghanaian organisation, but their country directly. As Kwesi Hayford, President of the Esports Association, Ghana noted: "It shows that gamers aren't truants or dropouts but can compete for medals under their country's flag."[215] This, he hoped, would in turn open new venues for interacting with the government, private sponsors, and the parents of prospective players. As part of this, he also noted ongoing efforts to bring esports to the Olympics,[216] which would represent a massive step in mainstreaming and legitimising esports.

Interestingly, despite this desire for recognition and support, the majority of events I attended appeared to pay little attention to the role of fans and audience accessibility. Events received little public promotion and often were only announced in closed groups. While some offered livestreams of key matchups, there was no space for in-person audience/observers at most of them, with me being one of the only non-participants. While this was, in part, due to the limited availability of space at game centres hosting the events, most organisers I discussed the topic with appeared to treat in-person audience experience and presence as an afterthought. Correspondingly, when discussing the local esports ecosystem with players uninvolved in it, they had limited awareness of it. Xhaq noted how he had seen billboards promoting events some years prior, but felt like the local scene was largely dormant at present - as he had not heard about any of the events happening nearly every week throughout the city. This disconnect between the organisers and the local non-esports players bears some resemblance to the struggles game developers have reaching and establishing a local audience which I discussed in chapter 4.

As I highlight in this chapter, Accra’s games industry is shaped by its connections to the global ecosystem of gaming. The first generation of developers was reliant on their families’ international networks to provide them with the resources to autodidactically learn their skillsets, while the current generation can benefit from a well-structured digital network of mentor- and partnerships throughout the continent. All throughout, however, financial access is largely dependent on (Western) development funds, which require developers to spend resources on making their games appealing to often uninterested third parties and navigating their bureaucracies rather than dedicating their time towards developing games. While most esports events are organised locally, key organisers like the Esports Association, Ghana are part of global networks, with organisers and players both aspiring to compete on an international scale. “Going pro,” and the money and travel opportunities that came with it presents a new opportunity to reach financial stability and social recognition. Particularly where this was linked to

[212] Callus and Potter, ‘Michezo Video’, 315.
[213] Ana Karakolevska, ‘African Esports Championship: Everything You Need to Know’, IESF, 12 August 2024, https://iesf.org/african-esports-championship-is-here/.
[214] Ana Karakolevska, ‘Welcome to WEC24!’, IESF, 11 November 2024, https://iesf.org/welcome-to-wec24/.
[215] ‘The Future of Esports - Exploring the Rise of Competitive Gaming and Its Impact on Traditional Sport.’
[216] Seth E. Jenny, Sam Schelfhout, and Nicolas Besombes, ‘Esports in the Olympics’, in *Routledge Handbook of Esports*, ed. Seth E. Jenny et al. (London: Routledge, 2024), 496–503, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003410591.

representing Ghana internationally, this would help legitimise esports – and gaming as a whole – among wider Ghanaian society.

7 Conclusion

This thesis set out to accomplish two primary goals. First, to serve as a description of Accra's gaming ecosystem and its role in the wider world of gaming. By drawing attention to the ways games are (and are not) played and otherwise engaged with in the context of Accra, I hope to contribute to the nascent scholarship on gaming in a Global South, particularly an African, context. This, I hope, will allow it to serve as a foundation which future researchers can use to build on and enrich and compare their data with.

Second, I explored how engagement with digital games reflects young people's position between aspirations of a successful future and the reality of youth in Africa (often manifesting as a situation of waithood), the stigma associated with games as addictive and childish, and being part of the global digital world – if only, for most, by accessing it from its margins. For many, particularly those deeply and in some cases, economically, involved, digital gaming is linked to the pursuit of acknowledgement and support across geo-cultural scales: from Ghanaian society, from prospective local financiers, and from the international community. This, they hope, will create new (economic) opportunities which enable more people to escape their often precarious situations, and enable more interactions with international structures and peers. As such, much of this involvement is driven by passion for the medium of games and the (sub)culture around them and the hope of improving the conditions in which not just engagement with games, but everyday life, takes place in.

Gaming in Accra is, however, also shaped by frustrations borne from the tensions of its position in Ghanaian society and the worldwide digital ecosystem. Issues of digital materiality like frequent power outages and expensive, high-latency internet connections are met with resignation, as gamers recognise their structural nature and the difficulty of addressing them. Software piracy, I argue, can be read not just as driven by poverty, but as a response to the inaccessibility of games to many prospective players and feelings of being left out of global systems. Similarly, the popularity of mobile games is likely in part influenced by their incorporation of local payment methods. A high level of commitment to digital games and their subculture may also be a way to navigate the uncertainties of young adult life – whether stuck in a situation of waithood like many adults across the continent, or as a deliberate extension of pre-social adult life.

Perhaps as an additional kind of response to one's everyday situation, the African-developed games which my interlocutors enjoyed the most incorporated relatable elements of modern everyday African life rather than being inspired by mythologies and folklore, as many games made by African developers are. Everyday games allow players and developers to (sarcastically) engage and play with common grievances and frustrations, helping localise them and make them feel unique. Games based on mythology often incorporate educational and Pan-African messages, which to some extent seemed to remind players of the types of serious games that many game developers relied on financially. The reliance on serious games could be interpreted as reinforcing the perceived marginal position of Ghana/Africa by casting it in need for foreign development and education. Players were concerned with how authentically Ghana was represented to an international audience in games, acknowledging that such representations had a lot of potential to shape the country's image worldwide.

Analysing Accra's gamers through the lens of subculture highlights how gamers connect to the rest of the world, as markers of identity, tastes, and values echo those commonly found in gamer spaces online. The ideal of "true gamer" status appears to be shaped by said global tastes, even where they clash with local ones. This suggests that despite the accessibility barriers, Accra's gamers are active in international digital spaces, something also visible in some interlocutors' engagement with high

commitment mobile games. Yet, certain parts of these spaces, like (action-focused) online play remain out of reach for many, leading to a situation where they are looking inwards from the margins and can observe but not interact. This confrontation with one's own marginal position likely further leads to either resignation with one's situation, or passion towards changing it.

Commercial activity, and those involved in it, plays an important role locally by offering spaces for peers to meet and connect. Game centres serve as meeting grounds, tournament venues, and often as prospective gamers' introduction to the world of gaming. The latter sometimes leads to tensions with the gamers' parents, requiring employees to engage in parent outreach and education. This in turn highlights the second major role played by gaming industry professionals. As respectable, employed adults game developers, esports organisers, and game centre employees dedicate notable amounts of time towards explaining and promoting their activities to outsiders such as parents, prospective funders, and potential future professionals. These activities are driven, I argue, by the hope of improving the social and economic standing of games and their players. Such hope also extends beyond Ghana, with efforts to draw international attention, participate in international structures like esports tournaments and comic cons, and educate foreign players on African cultures. These efforts aim to make the global gaming ecosystem fully recognise the potential of Ghana – and Africa's – players and developers.

These aspirations are particularly visible in esports players' aspirations of "going pro" and being able to turn gaming into a full-time job. The hope of turning one's skill into a way of achieving financial freedom was widespread with my interlocutors. Opportunities to travel and compete internationally are valued particularly highly. Beyond paying for otherwise unattainable travel, these opportunities would lead to recognition among the Ghanaian and worldwide public, which in turn would help legitimise Ghanaian esports. Beyond counteracting the stigma associated with gaming, players and organisers hoped that such recognition would help create more opportunities to recruit players and sponsors, professionalising the industry and allowing more people to attain financial independence through gaming. Esports in particular is seen as a way to creatively seize the new economic opportunities of the digital world and use them to improve the socioeconomic situation of oneself and one's peers.

Throughout my thesis I have aimed to highlight various avenues for future research. Some are based on the limitations and obstacles I encountered during my research stay, others on deliberate exclusions for the sake of scope. Connecting my findings with those of other researchers similarly is likely to yield a wealth of interesting insights. Critically, my research is limited to largely in-person experiences within the Greater Accra Area. While some experiences are generalisable, it is likely that Accra's position in the ecosystem differs from that of other cities in Ghana, and particularly more rural areas, which are even more distant from the centres of global gaming. Similarly, while I can compare my experiences with those from scholars researching in Kenya and South Africa, further comparisons, particularly in non-Anglophone African countries, could further highlight which factors are part of the experience of gaming in an African context. On a smaller scale, more targeted investigations of specific topics, like the global funding structure of esports and game development or the prevalence and mechanics of software piracy could yield valuable data across disciplines of game studies, socioeconomics, and international relations, among others. The role which Accra, as a major global dumping site for e-waste, holds in the realm of games could similarly be very interesting, but did not fit with the rest of my research. Gaming in Africa will only continue to grow, and I hope that this thesis, together with the various works on which it relies, can serve as a productive foundation for future research.

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