The Underground Resistance.
Resilience and evolutions of analogue competitive videogaming: the case study of "Street Fighter 3" and the Italian Community[*]

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Video games have been, and increasingly are, a component of popular culture. With their growing popularity, their ability to generate mythopoiesis, stereotypes and language is becoming increasingly evident, as is their economic relevance and the size of their fan bases. The pandemic and the consequent increase in the use of digital media has further made this phenomenon a more and more important part of many people's lives, no longer just young or very young, increasingly extending to other socio-demographic groups, as is also evident in the growing phenomenon of nostalgia and 'retro gaming'. The well-known Street Fighter saga, as a whole, has had a very strong media, artistic and imaginative impact, just think of the fact that the franchise in question has expanded to include comics, anime, films in a trans and cross media manner. Today, communities of gamers, be they platform loyalists, nostalgic or early adopters, are a fertile field to study the role that Street Fighter 3 has had and still has in shaping imaginaries, communities, places and practices dedicated to this activity, in fact, almost 20 years after its release, the title is still played, even competitively, by specific communities in the sector, despite its apparent commercial failure. This video game has the typical characteristics of 1990s fighting games, but the fact that it is still played has brought interesting innovations and developments, updates that run parallel to the game itself: streaming, new gaming peripherals and new communities. Gaming peripherals, necessary for tournaments, are not only space-consuming but also vintage, requiring dedicated space, skills and technical knowledge that players often learn on their own by domesticating the tool in question. Given these premises, the research intends to structure itself in an ethnographic investigation aimed at exploring the members of a community of Italian players, avid enthusiasts, numerically meagre and heterogeneous in terms of age and socio-economic background. This community has demonstrated resilience in terms of continuity, challenging the evolutionary processes of gaming, but making its own customised evolutionary transformation, partially adapting to contemporary modes of 'play'. Despite being a heterogeneous community, the places dedicated to tournaments and gatherings are for the most part located in the city of Milan, the place of choice for conducting the research, consisting of semi-structured interviews with selected individuals. With rare exceptions, these players have nurtured the existence of the community for over ten years, interacting even outside its physical space and enriching its direct and indirect knowledge of the game in question.

Keywords: gaming, retrogaming, phygital, community, ethnography

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Introduction

Over the past 20 years, digital transformation has manifested itself in the form of steady progress towards the production and distribution of increasingly portable devices, from computers to smartphones to wearable technologies. The gaming sector has undergone a progressive abandonment of the physicality of gaming in favour of forms of interaction that are less and less tied to pure spatial "presence" and "co-presence" (Gee, 2006). This phenomenon, widespread throughout the digital technology sector, has increasingly led to a paradigm shift away from "ownership", linked to the physicality of peripherals and analogue media, in favour of the paradigm of "access", related to platforms and their business systems – e.g. from Blockbuster to Netflix. This can also be seen from the perspective of the shift from "cosality" to "non-cosality" of both media and experience (Han, 2022).

Moving from the arcade phenomenon of the 1990s (Kirriemuir, 2006) to the disappearance of physical forms of software – through the replacement of optical storage media in favour of cloud-based ones – we have come to the domination of the digital/online dimension altering the spatiality of play and interactions, peripherals, consumption and production practices. The various social interactions that used to take place in predefined physical spaces have been replaced, modified and often overlaid by actions that occur entirely on the net, in a process of suspension of direct contact and in an environment that has restructured itself mainly into mediated or semi-mediated synergies. The resulting "assemblage of play" (Taylor, 2009) – i.e. the interrelationships (among many) of hardware and software, but also the social practices external to the game as well as the individual and community human components which ontologically define "play" – is altered.

Spatiality thus becomes a dimension of value analysis, both of play and relationships. It is precisely space, with the emergence of shared work (co-working) and living (co-housing) places, that is receiving more and more attention; less attention is given to social relations for playful purposes, externalised from the place of work and life, but functional to essential parts of human life. The sharing of the rigidly defined space dedicated to social-ludic interaction becomes the first form of "resistance" to the multidimensional change of personal relationships and values.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a powerful incremental factor in the consumption of digital media products (Amankwah-Amoah, Khan, Wood, & Knight, 2021). Not only has the demand and supply of these products increased, but also the hours per capita spent behind a screen, and consequently the knowledge of the tools. Devices have grown exponentially, increasing in number and sophistication in many homes. They have been domesticated and made part of an incrementally diverse and pervasive media ecosystem. Also in the gaming sector, the pandemic acted as an amplifier of an almost consolidated trend: the disappearance of residual physicality and the consolidation of a "border" (Benti & Stadtmann, 2022) not always perfectly defined between "internal" and "external" space. No longer, therefore, only a spatial division, but also a temporal dilation, with more uncertain (or "blurred") nuances between lifetimes and "play/entertainment" moments.

This phenomenon, evident in the success of streaming as well as social networking platforms, has also fully involved the configuration of ludic entertainment (Cabeza-Ramírez, Sánchez-Cañizares, García, & Santos-Roldán, 2022). The home, in turn, becomes the ultimate multifunctional perimeter, "hosting" actions ranging from work to interactive entertainment, thus mirroring multidimensional and multilevel globalisation. What can be experienced inside one's home is precisely everything the market has to offer, from selling clothes to enjoying immersive online experiences to heterogeneous forms of media. All of this without the need for a physical search that can be experienced in an outdoor environment. This steadily increasing trend is doubly related to new forms of interaction and sociability, as well as to a fast-growing phenomenon, especially – but not only – among young people, namely "social withdrawal". This phenomenon includes aspects such as social anxiety and the redistribution of time, including the shopping cart, in favour of non-tangible goods and products – "not-things" – dematerialised in the virtual universe (Fong et al., 2023). Entertainment, as an integral and integrated part of the market, becomes, in this way, an everyday usable, "zero kilometres" experience.

This work sets out to explore these transformative dynamics that have increasingly affected our societies, leading to a total overturning of the paradigms of life and play, and the forms of resistance that have been implemented in "defence" of the spatiality and "physicality" of interpersonal relations. This "defence" manifests itself not only in the preservation of "outdated" experiences, whether medial or social, but also in gatekeeping and segregation phenomena in communities, whether online or offline. This analytical process is carried out through the analysis of a case study concerning a small community of video gamers, fans of a single game, who meet every two months in the city of Milan, "defending" in this way values and passions in open contrast to what the current commercial gaming experience proposes.

The goal of this article is to clarify how this Italian gaming community manages to maintain its resilience and continuity over time, and what techniques and strategies it deploys to adapt to the industry's new infrastructure and contemporary gaming practices while retaining its distinct identity and traditions. In an attempt to explore these dimensions, this paper seeks to delve into the practices, adaptations, and evolution of the community. In addition, in this particular case study, there is also an interplay between nostalgia, technical knowledge and innovation, which are in turn intertwined with the cultural and social dynamics specific to the Italian context. This paper is subdivided as follows: the first section aims to delve into the theme of spatiality in the pandemic context, the forms of gaming connected to it, and a brief depiction of the peculiarities of the arcade centres "phenomenon"; the second section describes the case study, both regarding the gaming community and the game in question; the third section concerns the methodology adopted during the interviews; the fourth section reports reflections and results about the empirical experience; the conclusions, divided into two parts, will first present a synthesis of what has been analysed during the study, and then will offer some observations on the issues of elitism and gatekeeping concerning events that occurred posthumously to the fieldwork.

Pandemic as an amplifier of gaming experiences: trends and resistances

The pandemic, despite its adverse effects in various spheres of daily life, has significantly increased earnings in several multimedia sectors, directly responding to the demand-supply of the period (Paschke, Austermann, Simon-Kutscher, & Thomasius, 2021; Vargo, Zhu, Benwell, & Yan, 2021). Of these, video games have been among the biggest beneficiaries, both on mobile platforms and on "semi-portable" hardware such as increasingly high-performance computers and consoles (Şener, Yalçın, & Gulseven, 2021). The pandemic is seen as the central stimulus for the production of new mutable – and adaptable – forms of gaming, in turn encompassing mechanisms of "escape" from a reality considered "oppressive". This process has strongly stimulated the development and dissemination of tools for the enjoyment of augmented reality activities, both recreational and otherwise: among these, one cannot fail to mention the metaverse, to which companies and players in the recreational and communication sector have begun to pay attention with growing interest (Mohammed, Aljanab, & Gadekallu, 2024).

While industry, consumption and trends are moving in this seemingly unstoppable transformative current, apparently dissonant experiences continue to multiply: music on vinyl has regained a significant weight in sales, not only for niches or enthusiasts (Mall, 2021); the same can be said for cassettes (Demers, 2017). Clothing styles and film aesthetics, meanwhile, have often moved in a conservative direction, taking up past or older canons, in an increasingly uncovered and numerically consistent manner (Kalinina, 2012).

A similar discourse can be made for retro gaming. This phenomenon, in turn, is structured in various (and different) directions: from the production of new consoles, powered by new technologies and new computing engines but with retro/vintage aesthetics, designed to replay past video game titles; or with a nostalgic return or collector's approach to the original consoles, now technologically outdated (Bowman & Wulf, 2023; Wulf, Bowman, Rieger, Velez, & Breuer, 2018).

Amid the transformative process described above, which can be considered fully mature, there are forms of "resistance" that generally absorb communities of fans of a single game or, at most, an (episodic) saga of said game. Despite contemporary contaminations in the means of communication and interaction (from forums to mobile chats), these communities tend to seek the original experience through the "purity" of the hardware – and often also the software – of origin. The possible examples of this phenomenon are innumerable, just think of the most famous titles for Nintendo platforms, such as Super Mario, The Legend of Zelda or Pokemon, where long-lived fans abound. They not only play and purchase the new titles and the consoles needed to reproduce them but also conserve or collect the old versions and the related devices to operate them: in this way, they give rise to communities, online and offline, to share, purchase, exchange memorabilia and to experience through media fruitions now less and less frequent in other spheres of life (Heineman, 2014).

Also positioned in this same vein is the fighting game genre,[1] a video game type that had its most prosperous phase in the 1990s (Harper, 2010; Steltenpohl, Reed, & Keys, 2018).

These games were born with characteristics strongly linked to the gaming context: the need, by genre type, to be present on-site with several other people created a level of interaction strongly connected to the game's sociality. As a result of that success, the Italian *picchiaduro* community was formed and developed since the first half of the 1990s, a dynamic period for arcades in Italy. Those years fully reflected the historical, socio-economic, technological and logistical characteristics of the medium in question. At that time, the genre was mainly accessible in bars and public places, often equipped with one or two booths, or in "game rooms" (Kirriemuir, 2006), spaces dedicated to video game entertainment,[2] born from the competitive design typical of the 1980s (Kocurek, 2015). Game rooms were public places that were "populist, energetic, and ultimately threatening" (Williams, 2006, p. 3), and consistently fostered the formation of community identities and norms, often challenging social conventions and generating phenomena of "moral panic" (Skolnik & Conway, 2019, pp. 745–746). These spaces, mainly urban but sometimes itinerant in local events, created codified socio-spatial interactions, which technological evolution gradually transformed or erased (Su, 2010). The initial impossibility of reproducing these technologies at home (Fassone, 2020; 2021) reinforced the mythopoiesis of the arcade experience, with both positive and negative implications.

The social complexity of arcades was intertwined with that of arcade communities. Such spaces were both physical and "metaphysical spaces where participants negotiated social and cultural conventions" (Skolnik & Conway, 2019, p. 742), contributing to the formation of a global arcade fighting "culture" (Harper, 2013) and the development of subcultures (Shaw, 2010) related to the media and the players themselves. As in the case of role-playing gaming sessions, where contexts isolated from external interruptions were crucial (Williams, Hendricks, & Winkler, 2006, p. 26), arcades also set clear spatial/physical boundaries functional to the play-relationship act. Although this experience is shared in many international contexts (Berger, 2017), in some specific cases, such as Italy, France or Japan, more enduring forms of resistance and aggregation have been observed.

Arcade centres, places par excellence for encounters between enthusiasts – as well as a world apart from their contemporary versions made of commercial establishments linked to betting and video poker –, experienced moments of strong cultural impact at the time, albeit with evident ambivalent aspects, both positive and negative, as well as national and contextual differentiations. In the Italian case, the phenomenon was decidedly smaller in scope than the American, French and, above all, Japanese ones. Still, their impact at the cultural level and on the collective imagination remains.

The end of that era coincided first with the advent of "porting" on consoles, more and more similar to the originals, of games that were present in the arcade centres; and later with the advancement of online gaming and the consequent realisation of networked multiplayer gaming possibilities (Flanagan, 2017). The substitution of physicality, especially of a genre that was declining in profit compared to more mainstream videogame novelties (sports, fps, simulations, etc.), had become definitive with the advent of the so-called "Seventh Era" consoles (2004-onwards), implemented with a now highly advanced online

gaming system, along with the increasing diffusion of broadband connections, a determining factor for interconnected gaming.

The following section delves into this paper's case study.

The case study

Although these changes are now at least two decades old, some communities have resisted, albeit unevenly, the external transformations in the constant search for the "original" experience. One such community is that of *Street Fighter 3*. Despite the saga being made up of numerous episodes, the sixth of which was recently released (2023), the third chapter was the last, apart from various spin-offs or cross-overs with other brands, to be "anchored" almost entirely to the physicality of the game venue. Unlike the later chapters, which were conceived and created for online play,[3] and regardless of some – not entirely successful – attempts to bring the third chapter[4] to contemporary gaming platforms, *Street Fighter 3* has remained faithful to its origins, and to the values of its fanbase. Although this game followed the specific market dynamics of the time (Woodcock, 2019), in which it was technically and commercially impossible to reproduce it perfectly except on arcade platforms, enthusiasts have over the years "elevated" its nature beyond the original economic structures. This made the game not only partially untethered to its initial commercial conditions, but it was "ennobled" in the task of counteracting today's economic dynamics of online-only sales and gaming experience.

These communities' resilience, in a proto- and pre-globalised sense, has also manifested in Italy. This should not be particularly surprising, as there are several communities related to this specific game, albeit composed of small numbers, in many European, American and Asian countries. Ultimately, this is a form of resistance that possesses several reading lenses: physical space vs. mobile online boundaries; nostalgic affection vs. obsession with trends; spatially immobile socialisation vs. a-spatial interactivity; passion vs. changing of user's tastes; analogue vs. digital game formats. The enjoyment of these types of experiences, constrained to peculiar spaces, tools and times, always requires greater engagement and commitment than current entertainment media. The result is that the motivations of the users of these platforms, their engagement and their determination are often multifaceted and intense, which is why, even though they are niches, it is not unusual to see the formation of close-knit and highly motivated communities, but also easily prone to phenomena of exclusivism, closure and "toxicity".

Although it is possible to observe these phenomena in many different frameworks, the present work has focused its attention on the particular case of *Street Fighter 3*, a video game which, due to its peculiarities, belongs to the "fighting game" genre, as well as the historical period of its release, is worthy of a specific in-depth section.

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Street Fighter 3

The *Street Fighter 3* saga, which consists of three different iterations (*Street Fighter III: New Generation* (1997), *Street Fighter III: 2nd Impact* (1997) and *Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike* (1999)), is part of the well-known *Street Fighter* series (1987-present) by the Japanese software house *Capcom*. It is a series of fighting games, i.e. a genre of video games based on close combat between two or more opponents, either bare-handed or with weapons. The aim, simple in its conception and realisation, is to defeat the opponent, either operated by a real user or managed by the CPU. This saga was explicitly created for coin-operated arcade games, abbreviated to coin-op, i.e. physical machines operating inside booths in which inputs directly from the players' actions are reproduced, processed through electrical or computerised components and subsequently visualised through outputs on an electronic monitor or similar display. Specifically, *Street Fighter 3* was produced for the CD-ROM-based *CP System III* (*CPS-3*) hardware, distancing itself from the previous titles in the series regarding hardware and game graphics. The commercial success of *Street Fighter 2* was not replicated by 3, also due to changes in gameplay and, above all, in the cast of usable characters that had previously become iconic and easily recognisable in mass culture. In fact, in the first iteration, only two iconic characters from the series – *Ryu* and *Ken* – returned, increasing to four (with the addition of *Chun-li* and *Gouki*) in the third and final version of the game. Although to this day the game is considered by fans to be the "pinnacle" not only of the series but of the genre, the lack of success at the time made it invisible to the mainstream audience and soon forgotten by the gaming scene, which was increasingly interested at home gaming systems and in 3D fighting games.

Despite this, more than twenty years after its development, *Street Fighter 3: 3rd Strike* boasts a host of dedicated and resilient who, with passion and often personal material resources, have made community gaming on well-defined physical spaces a form of resistance to media transformations. The experience, in order to be considered authentic and thus accepted by the community, must possibly be lived through a cabinet equipped with the original gaming hardware (*CPS-3*), thus demarcating the choice to inextricably link the survival of the game through the revitalisation and maintenance of the original peripherals. Regardless of the presence of alternatives more affordable to a mass audience, i.e. emulated online versions of the game on consoles and PCs, these enthusiasts remain faithful to the physicality of interaction, both ludic and relational, in designated socialisation spaces outside of remote interaction. "Bodies in play situated in determined contexts" (Apperley & Jayemane, 2012, p. 18), which at the same time cannot free themselves from the overall relationality of the action.

In short, the game would not survive if the physical community did not exist, taking the peculiar materiality ("material turn") of gaming to extremes (p. 18). At the same time, the relational dimensions connected to this particular experience are taken to other antithetical extremes, through forms of elitism and gatekeeping.

The Italian case: physical communities, the Studio "Ashirikubi" and the balance between market and relational values

Italian communities of fighting games enthusiasts have existed since the very existence of arcade cabinets, in which many young and very young in the 1980s and 1990s could have their first impact with a technology impossible to reproduce in their own homes (Fassone, 2020; 2021). The places where this type of entertainment could be found were diverse but traced back to specific areas, spatially and temporally: during summer holidays in seaside resorts, in the "mobile" amusement arcades of town festivals, in ad-hoc commercial venues, often found only in large cities, in stadiums and shopping centres. Despite the potential heterogeneity of environments in the Italian case, the *sala giochi* ("arcade centre") – or at least the idea that this specific gaming experience represented – possessed well-defined connotations that transcended the national context. Generally speaking,

> arcade cabinets were often placed in arcade, with noisy pinball machines' mechanics and chimes, loud music, low lighting, etc. Arcade cabinets are designed to give a specific experience that a common computer desktop cannot render (Dor, 2014, p. 27),

thus placing this kind of environment in a socio-cultural context defined by the centrality of the physical (visual, audio, tactile, relational) experience of play.

The memories, often nostalgic, of a past seen as a moment of ludic interface devoid of later socio-occupational constraints are part of the engine that fuels the current, numerically meagre and molecularised, communities of gamers who refer to the video games of those years.

Italian fighting game communities, as of today, represent a small segment of national gaming due both to the limited genre's commercial value and to the recent transformation of the forms of gaming. Fighting games require the presence of at least two players, and only in the last 10-15 years has the technology to be able to enjoy this experience entirely online with a sufficient degree of "appreciation". Indeed, now hardware peripherals and Internet networks can reproduce appreciable experiences without a high delay in input response and a significant absence of lag, which were crucial factors in the original gaming experience. However, at the same time, technology has impoverished another type of dimension present in the 1980s and 1990s, namely that of relational nature. Physical presence during gaming sessions, identified in a precise spatial location and during a dedicated timeframe, went hand in hand with an often obligatory visual and tactile relationality with the other players present in place. This dimension, or value, has declined with the adoption of the new virtual gaming media and their respective forms of interaction and communication: much they succeed in reproducing the action in real-time, they inevitably lose part of the purest and most direct relational dynamism.

Considering the importance of the game's original experience and the relational one, groups of specific fighting game enthusiasts have, over the years, formulated solutions

aimed at reducing their molecularisation across the country: first through the creation of geographically identifiable communities (regional or city-specific), often through the use of forums and subsequently dedicated communication platforms (e.g. Discord, but also the more common forms of messaging software); and recently with more structured attempts revolving around the phenomenon of e-sports (Hindin, Hawzen, Xue, Pu, & Newman, 2020). In this last evolutionary phase, the genre has inevitably transformed, adapting to the competition and sponsorship logic while embracing the often uniquely online means dedicated to video games, such as streaming, video production and the creation of national and international tournaments with commercial content. The permeability between the boundaries of analogue and digital gaming (Dixon & Weber, 2011) has thus reached its most advanced stage, leaving the latter in an increasingly dominant position.

Nevertheless, not all games and communities have been fully influenced by this latest transformative process, remaining anchored to values, both of purity of experience and distance from the neo-liberal and competitive market mechanism, in open contrast to the simple process of competitive and commercial expansion that the media has undergone.[5] This, in Italy as elsewhere, is the case with *Street Fighter 3: 3rd Strike*, and *Studio Ashirikubi* in particular. Born from the passion of a single player, the Studio has expanded by involving the niche of gamers passionate about the aforementioned game scattered throughout Italy, proposing to experience the ludic – and relational – experience as it was originally conceived, codified by rules and customs crystallised in time and in the people who constitute them.

Methodology

This work makes use of an empirical approach based on a small-scale ethnographic study, already used in the study of the relationship between the real and virtual worlds of gaming in everyday life (Giddings, 2014), derived from the study of media cultures and subcultures (Ang, 1985; Morley, 1992) which aims at an inductive process of analysis (Geertz, 1973) capable of creating causal connections through the participants' experience.

The data collection was structured in two phases: a first one characterised by a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews addressed to individual members of the gaming community; a second one consisting of a return of the results, first elaborated by the researchers and discussed again with the community members through a focus group – in the form of open discussion – with low directivity. The ethnographic data were collected by one of the researchers, who was not only a researcher but also an engaged user in the community under observation. This necessitated the use of a sociological reflexivity and a more external gaze, less engaged in the dynamics under observation (Bovone, 2010). These contingencies partly gave rise to the choice of constructing the research through the points of view of two researchers, the first actively part of the community and therefore able to enter as a privileged witness, the second external and unattached to the internal

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mechanics of the group being observed. In this way, it was possible to deploy various levels of observation, as well as reflexivity, on the data in possession. One of these levels is undoubtedly the reflexivity of the interviewer in question, a privileged witness but also a researcher; a further level is that present in the relationship with the interviewees, members of a common group; finally, a last level is the one developed between the researchers themselves during and after the field observations.

The case study of this paper is an Italian community of gamers dedicated to the game *Street Fighter 3: 3rd Strike*, which meets about every two months in a defined physical space in the city of Milan, the *Casa dei Giochi*. In this place and at a precise moment in time, the gaming experience is recreated as it was originally conceived, i.e. through the original hardware and software: a form of gaming vigorously sought after by this community. The first pool of interviewees comprised eight gamers, heterogeneous in terms of age, origin and socio-economic background, who were given a main outline and eight points related to the research theme, which can be found in the appendix.

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews involved the voluntary participation of the interviewees, preceded by a brief description of the purpose of the work, during a two-day gathering of the group (25 and 26 November 2023). All interviews, a total of 8, varying in length, were recorded and transcribed in full. The presence among the researchers of an active member of the community under analysis led to the adoption of a further methodological approach: the collection of the interviews was entirely entrusted to him, as a privileged witness, capable of activating human relationships and interpreting data often unknown to potential outsiders, while the transcription and analysis phase was first carried out by the researcher from outside the community itself, and then proceeded, with a reflexive approach, to a collegial comparison. The reason for this choice was motivated by the fact that returning to the results by benefiting from a directly involved point of view actively allows for a greater understanding and fidelity to the thoughts of the player community, thus transcending the role of the researcher/observer alone but at the same time also that of the player/member of the community personally engaged.

Once the data from the first round of interviews had been collected and transcribed, it was first processed and analysed by the researchers and then discussed in a focus group with the gamers. The focus group was held two months after the first survey, during the next community meeting, again at the *Casa dei Giochi* in Milan (January 21, 2024). On this occasion 3 new members of the community were added, who participated after receiving an explanation and insight into the themes, purposes and tentative results of the research. The intention was to re-discuss the results of the research, re-interpret the interpretations and co-construct the meanings with the subjects, removed from the position of mere objects of study but becoming active participants in the meanings' construction (Donati, 2011; Pinheiro & Colombo, 2021). During this second instance of confrontation, a structured roundtable discussion was held, encouraging reflective dialogue among participants. This session included the eight individuals previously interviewed in the initial survey, as well as three additional gamers who were present only for this occasion. The inclusion of new voices further enriched the conversation, enhancing the depth of reflection within the community.

As a result, the discussion became more dynamic and engaging, fostering meaningful exchanges that benefited both individual participants and the group as a whole.

Finally, the analysis performed on the data, the themes that emerged and the conclusions drawn by the authors were definitely challenged by intra-community events that occurred posthumously to the collection of empirical data. Due to certain forms of exclusivism and gatekeeping operated outside the original fieldwork timeframe, but which the authors became aware of through intra-community sources, a new level of reflexivity and analysis of the data had to be put in place, integrating the new elements that emerged with respect to what they already possessed.

Results

In presenting the results, we will proceed according to the same dynamic as described in the methodology: an initial part of the analysis of the interviews that allowed us to reach an elaboration of meanings such that we could return to discuss them again with the players, and the subsequent elaboration and co-processing of these results in a reflexive and layered manner. Starting with the first phase of the research, we will faithfully use the words of the interviewees themselves, precisely to enhance their role in the construction of meanings.

As far as personal experience with the game is concerned, this varies discretely with age. One of the interviewees is

> (...) born in 2001, so I'm one of the new generation for this... these, how to say... these games. I'm younger than the game itself, so, how should I say... my thinking about the game and how it should be played is completely different from many (Int. 8).[6]

The age dimension assumes a twofold relevance: younger players are provided with a different availability of time to devote to the game than the "older" ones; to this factor must be added the opposite overall experiences of the video game world, and of this game in particular, in which the younger players have not directly experienced the game at the time of its launch, and thus not even all the original relational experiences. Therefore, their media and video game universe is more diverse. Community members are often gamers who have been passionate about video games since adolescence and have then cultivated this passion over time, some of them more continuously than others. This aspect also affects the dimension of nostalgia, which for some is a concrete experience and life story, while for others it is a stylistic and formal, more idealised element. Some of them have a passion that is not limited only to *Street Fighter* and the related community but also play other games (or genres of games) both on different consoles and within other communities. A case in point is Int. 6, a fan of the fighting game genre, who arrived in the community under analysis after other similar experiences:

> (...) the first thing I did, when I came to Milan to study at university, was to look if there was a *Tekken*[7] community in Milan, and, and luckily there was, there was, I found it after two months, when I arrived in Milan, and it was here, at the *Casa dei Giochi*. And... and so that's how I started. Then over the years, um... there was a little bit of... a little bit of influence a little bit of... of other fighting games, 3D, 2D, *Street Fighter*, *King of Fighters*, and a little bit at a time I started to look at a little bit of everything, until I came to know about *Third Strike* (Int. 6).

Street Fighter 3: Third Strike, due to its peculiarities and, in part, its difficulty, is considered

> (...) a game that has created a great myth around itself, of... that has... that carries great respect with it, like this sort of colossus of the, of the fighting games, that everyone looks up to, um, but very often they just do that, just watch (Int. 6).

These particularities are both attractive and exclusive. For some players, the fact that the game is, as such, a kind of selection apparatus for people who must necessarily be motivated and committed turns out to be a relevant aspect, while also introducing potential problems regarding gatekeeping and isolation phenomena. Some interviewees see this feature as a decisive advantage. In fact, according to one of them

> there are a lot of entry barriers... I the first time I went to play with the *Master*[8] I lost 70-0. It's a game that gives you an extreme advantage especially on a mental level, I mean, if you as a player already know what the novice is going to do you can punish him disproportionately, something that has changed in modern games. Um (...) it's positioned as quite an extreme game, which is why the people who come in to try it online, come offline, they're a certain type of people, and when they come in that room, for me they already have a basic respect and not... just for being there, and I'll never treat them badly because they lose 20, in fact, I recognise a path that I've taken and I try to include them in that path (Int. 4).

Even before the location and physical infrastructure required to use it, *Street Fighter 3: Third Strike* enables specific selective group dynamics. An additional dimension, layered on top of the software infrastructure, is the hardware, itself complex, perhaps more so than the game dynamics. One of the community members interviewed revealed that

> (...) the hardware on which *Street Fighter 3* runs is a hardware that has been, let's say, saved, over the years, by a person, a certain *Darksoft*, who made sure to recover all the dead cartridges of this system, and, and found a way to revive systems... cards that cost 700, 800 euros, that used to die because they had a suicide battery, that once... that finished practically erased the code inside, the protection code. So, you ended up with cards that were literally useless. So, for years, many people threw them away, and many who kept them anyway managed to revive them, which is why today we also have 6, 7 working systems that, like, 15 years ago was unthinkable (Int. 1).

The physicality of the hardware, as well as its authenticity, is considered by the majority of users to be a decisive, if not crucial, difference. The aspect of nostalgia is present, with different facets, in both older players and newcomers. The original game and hardware act as an intergenerational link through an experience considered (or desired) as common between the different age cohorts (Bolin, 2017). The concept of nostalgia, understood as "a

specific affective modality of engaging with the past" (Niemeyer & Keightley, 2020, p. 2) through a personal inner landscape of nostalgic imagination (Keightley & Pickering, 2012), is also linked to the new gaming possibilities allowed by porting, consoles and emulators, which are considered by many to be practices of a lower, less "pure" status than that possible with the original hardware. Indeed, as we can find from the words of Int. 1

> (...) seeing, um, that there was the possibility of playing on the original hardware, so, the game... regardless of whether one is good or not, but one knows that one is playing the way it was meant to be played. So I would say that, you know, it's crucial, for me, that there's all the original boards… (Int. 1).

And again:

> So, it's true that there are some... some surrogates, we can say so, of the game, I would never have thought to, however, consider the emulated game valid, sold, repurposed... however... various imperfect portings on consoles without ever in any case making a reference to what the original thing was. Now we have the possibility in 2024, by this time, to access the original thing anyway, in the way it used to be, so it's not just a question of nostalgia, it's a question of purity... good, a bis, again! I mean, if there's a chance, why not, why not... not go ahead and access the, the right thing, the pure thing, the round thing in its identity, and why not pull other people in. That is the concept (Int. 2).

> (...) now, apart from all the difficulties of meeting offline, the cost of playing online is much less. So... it is now possible to say, 'I don't give a damn about the community, I just want to play the game'. It is possible. I didn't. But my thought is that if it wasn't that game there wouldn't be anything else, people change, new people are always coming, different people are always coming, we find... common things to talk about, but starting with the game (Int. 4).

This need can be framed more precisely in the form of technostalgia (Bolin, 2017, pp. 103–106), in which firstly access to the original gaming hardware, and then being able to evoke past social relationships, is crucial. Emulation, therefore, remains in its sole dimension of "accessibility", without any actual game-preservation function, as it necessarily alters the gaming (Dor, 2014) and social experience.

Age and the media environment in which people have lived make this dimension even more varied and multifaceted. In fact, one of the youngest, talking about the physical hardware, i.e. the arcade cabinet, considers that

> precisely because it's, um... also the arcade cabinet, it has its reasons, the game was created to be on an arcade cabinet, it was created to have a lever and 6 buttons. It has to be, I mean, it has to be played that way precisely because the... the developers thought it should be played there. It had to, sorry, it had to be played there. But... for me, who was born from the online, making the jump from offline to online doesn't change anything for me, to be honest (Int. 8).

Still, it remains an important and particular aspect, but not with the same relevance, almost reverential, that those who, for anagraphic reasons, have become domesticated to the practice of video gaming precisely by using this type of device dedicated to it. The

exclusivity of the community, which in this as in other contexts could result in an exclusivist elitism, for younger members would seem to be partly limited by the possibility of transmedialising the physical gaming experience. Regarding the communicative aspects made possible by new digital technologies, community members agreed that these represent a possibility both for personal gratification and for the involvement of potential new members. One of them states:

> when I post on Instagram this stuff here that I'm doing, and I put the arcade cabinet up, a lot of people outside of this group are like, "ah, that's cool", "ah, wow". And, even comparing us with, with other gaming communities, we're like we're doing a more noble thing... (Int. 4).

The streaming of the video game on dedicated social platforms is also considered not only a possibility of opening up for the community but also an opportunity for "study" – for strategic analysis and in-depth examination concerning techniques and specificities of the use of the platform in other contexts.

The subsequent moment of elaboration proved to be more or less an enthusiastic continuation of what had been found and created previously. The purely competitive dimensions of the game were once again mixed with the relational, physical and temporally defined components, proving to be the lowest common denominator for the existence of the experience. It is reaffirmed that there would be no community – and no game – if *Studio Ashirikubi* and this specific space did not exist. Those who shelved the game in past decades, and those who have recently resumed it, would not have resumed/continued it in the absence of this type of organisation and the possibility of reconstructing an interactive, physical, almost anachronistic reality. For almost all members belonging to the younger generations, the dimension of physicality and its topicality are questioned. Similarly, the "historical" actors of the community counter this vision of the media, highlighting the crucial importance of the material component and denouncing the importance of the generational component, clearly posing a question of gatekeeping.

> I think the generational component matters a lot here, and in fact I don't... I don't agree at all... in the sense that, um, I would play the game apart from the fact that I like the game, the thing that gives me the most chance to have offline (FG. 2).

Playing *Street Fighter 3* – not sporadically or just online – would not be possible for almost all participants. The existence of the offline community remains the main parameter for continuing to play (for all but one of the two youngest interviewees, both digital natives), and the interpersonal, physical relationship is the only real value that detaches this experience from the domain of impersonality – and dangers – of the digital world. In the words of one of the longest-lived players, this dimension emerges irrefutably:

> (...) I remember the ovehyped excitement, and then the game itself, the fact of meeting the person who sits next to you, or stands... more often it happened to me that they were standing next to you, because they were arcade cabinets built to stand, and... and then from there I gradually discovered

that there was a whole undergrowth, a subculture... (...) today I am pleasantly here with the *3S* community, carrying on something that has changed in a general way... in a substantial way, in the strong points, no?. It's something that may be difficult to explain to one's grandchildren, or in any case, um, to the young people of today, who may be the target audience of a video game business that has in any case completely changed, um... it still remains a very valid alternative, or an option, to carry on the healthy part of the video game (Int. 2).

Conclusions

The target group for the case study under analysis proved to be heterogeneous in terms of age, gaming experience, geographical origin and socio-economic background. All eleven community members surveyed during this investigation (8+3), different in many ways, remain equally willing to travel long distances to be present at this specific time and place.

The dimensions of the relationship, and community, are certainly of crucial importance, even though the world of video games, especially the contemporary one, is – at least seemingly – less and less related to such traditional and recurrent dynamics of physical sociability. This relationship dimension is even more important than the game itself for many of the interviewees. As a (partially) competitive gaming community, it still needs to be organised around a game, a defined space, a defined time, and established practices and cultures of reference (Kocurek, 2014). It is interesting to add that while some literature disputes both the correlation between (crafted) physical spaces and the act of playing to framing this type of community into a subculture, and that these forms of resistance are indeed against the current market dynamics (Pitroso, 2024), the case study seems to demonstrate how, at the very least, members attempt to self-attribute these characteristics.

The age dimension, although blurred by other variables, remains an important component in consideration of the value scales, clearly distinguishing the digital natives (Riva, 2019) from those who have experienced the physicality of relationships in their "purity", making the fruition of the experience for the youngest more linked to the competitive and performative dimension than to the human and social one.

The game, as repeatedly mentioned, has its historicity and relevance also at a diachronic level and in terms of building imagery within the broader community of fans of the genre. The relevance and devotion to the game can be deduced from the importance attributed to the possibility of experiencing it using the original hardware, in some cases linked to dynamics of remembrance and nostalgia, in other cases to dynamics of exclusivism and purism.

The possibility of playing a video game released in 1999 with the original devices in 2023 is not only an exercise in "nostalgia" or "collecting" passion: in fact, this practice opens up new possibilities of hybridisation with new media, unanimously accepted by the members of the community. The reason for this inclination would seem, somewhat controversially, to be a desire for openness to the outside world, an attempt to curb the necessarily exclusive nature of an experience that is situated in a specific space and time. Partially, it represents

an attempt at revolution, not just resistance, to the dynamics of the contemporary video game world. Thus, a full-fledged, peculiar and authentic "existence" seems to be emerging almost three decades after the launch of the game in question. The game has been and remains peculiar: cloaked in an almost mythical fame, for everyone it is one of the pillars that allow the existence of the community experience; a passion, a supporting fulcrum around which human relationships, group dynamics, community could be built. The necessary physical presence also arises as a possible means of distinction, a status device, going so far as to consider players who are not willing to move spatially, invest in resources, engage and submit to the rules of the offline community as second-class players.

This aspect emerges in a veiled manner from the discourses, which, even when they turn towards openness to new media and participatory web tools, they do so in an ostentatious perspective, intending to show a supposed "superiority" of the community of reference. Physical presence is a *conditio sine qua non* for most of these people, as the "closed" situation during the pandemic phase and the consequent isolation were a crucial moment of questioning. For many gamers, and especially for the gaming sector, the pandemic period was instead a golden age: digital consumption, as well as the media infrastructure in the home, increased exponentially; the same was true for sharing and streaming platforms (Alvarez, 2024). However, this kind of "synthetic" relationship has not been able to replace, in the case of *Street Fighter 3* community members, the physical dimension, and this is not only because of problems with porting or fidelity to the original experience (which, as mentioned above, some were not even able to experience because of age). It is clear in the interviews that, in some cases, a parameter for deciding whether or not to play a game is the presence of its respective offline community.

It is therefore possible to observe a kind of recession of "synthetic" sociality, which, while continuing to become more sophisticated and increase the range of its possibilities and techniques, still fails to completely overlap – or replace – the experiences of co-present physicality

> (...) do I come more for the game or for the community? I like not to answer that question, in the sense, I don't want to know too much. (...) I mean, it's something that goes outside, at a certain point the game explodes, right?, it goes outside the game, and so it's a, an incredible starter to do things that, in its smallness, of the game, can still be important in a broader discourse of, of quiet living, or quality of life, which can also happen in other things that are not a video game, but how nice that it happens with a video game (Int. 2).

Between openness and elitism: traces of gatekeeping in the Italian SF3 community

The centrality of relationality found in this study, however, does not exclude mechanisms of closure towards the outside world, elevated to the point of resulting in explicit phenomena of gatekeeping and exclusion. Gatekeeping turns out to be a structural behavioural form peculiar to gaming communities, arising as a direct evolution of cultural practices and

behavioural codes of hardcore gaming born in arcades and, before them, in essentially similar form in the pool halls of the 1950s (Skolnik & Conway, 2019). After all, "braggadocio" (Su, 2010), techno-masculine values (Skolnik & Conway, 2019), sexism (Vossen, 2018), incidents of sexual harassment (Klepek, 2012), racism and forms of elitism are part and parcel of the history of fighting game communities, particularly those associated with the *Street Fighter* saga. In an environment run by a single organiser, the risk is to lose the proactive normalisation by external stakeholders who, due to their visibility, negate possible exclusionary phenomena. In our case study, direct actions were found to exclude certain players, in an arbitrary manner, by the community organisation. This resulted in a marginalisation derived from factors that are not related to relational or competitive issues concerning the game but linked to opposing visions of the management of the community's off and online interactions. This risk, however, had already been partially perceived, albeit in a sibylline and almost undertone manner, during some interviews.

The behavioural norms present at the time of the arcades, in this way, are reproduced once again: thus, it is possible to infer not only the need for hardware and software "uncontaminated" from contemporary online practices but also the reproduction of excluding behavioural dynamics typical of the historical environment of the genre. It should also be recognised, within the community in question, that even the inclusion of younger players is, at least in the cases found, always dependent on particular playing skills demonstrated in different contexts, including physical presence. In this way, such mechanisms produce an exclusionary elitism in which those who do not conform to the rules and codes of conduct are automatically positioned as outsiders. They are then formally divided from the group of insiders, either by personal technical skills (proficiency in the game) or by adaptation to the rules imposed by those who hold the technical monopoly (hardware and software) for the functioning of the community.

The fact that some of these events occurred posthumously to the interviews and focus group highlights how, despite the (albeit limited) visibility towards the outside world that occurred through this study, the closure towards "change" has (re-)found old forms of expression. Inevitably, the authors' analysis and reflexive process with respect to the data also had to proceed through a new analytical level, thereby having to question what was originally elaborated from empirical experience and thus having to re-analyse and re-work the material in their possession. This further insight, like the very nature of this community and gaming communities in general, is still an open question and potentially interesting object of future research topics.

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Notes

[1] The fighting game genre mainly presents two typologies, i.e. "encounter" or "scrolling" (Salvador, 2013). The case study of this work falls into the first typology.

[2] But not necessarily aimed at actual gamers.

[3] With the partial exception of the fourth chapter, initially present in both its arcade and later console/PC versions, but designed to have online functionality adhered to the latter type of hardware.

[4] Of which there are three different versions, but only the last one is used as a competitive and socialising component.

[5] Or, at the very least, as part of a "subculture of consumption" (Meikle, 2013) that seeks to differentiate itself from mainstream market mechanisms through its peculiarities.

[6] All the verbatim texts could be find in the original language in the appendix file

[7] *Tekken* is a video game series in the fighting game genre developed and published by *Namco*, which started in 1995. Initially developed as a series for arcade cabinets, versions were later released for various consoles as well.

[8] This is a senior member of the group who was given that additional appellation.