

BETWEEN CHALLENGE AND NARRATIVE: EXPLORING GAME PREFERENCES AMONG MEXICAN MILLENNIALS

ENTRE DESAFIO E NARRATIVA: EXPLORANDO AS PREFERÊNCIAS DE JOGOS DE MILLENNIALS MEXICANOS

Raúl Alejandro Treviño González

PhD in Humanistic Studies, Tecnológico de Monterrey (Monterrey/Mexico).

Professor at Tecmilenio (Monterrey/Mexico).

E-mail: raultg@tecmilenio.mx

Recebido em: 15 de outubro de 2025

Aprovado em: 20 de dezembro de 2025

Sistema de Avaliação: Double Blind Review

BCIJ | v. 5 | n. 2 | p. 148-167 | jul./dez. 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25112/bcij.v5i2.4488>



ABSTRACT

This study explores how Mexican millennial gamers describe their videogame preferences using the MDA framework to examine different forms of aesthetic enjoyment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty millennials from Monterrey, Mexico, evenly divided by gender. The results show that both men and women engage with a standard set of game aesthetics, including challenge, narrative, community, discovery, fantasy, and submission. Still, they approach and combine them in different ways. Male participants placed particular importance on narrative in classic Japanese role-playing games and on discovery in adventure games. When they socialize, they place greater emphasis on the competitive aspect of social gaming. Female participants tended to blend aesthetic experiences, connecting narrative with discovery and fantasy with submission, and emphasizing emotional engagement, cooperative play, and relaxation. Preferences were also shaped by the era in which players grew up, especially the late 1990s, which influenced their first gaming experiences and enduring attachments. These results suggest that aesthetic enjoyment is shaped by the interaction between game design, generational context, and players' social and experiential histories.

Keywords: Video Games. Gender. Aesthetics.

RESUMO

Este estudo explora como os gamers millennials mexicanos descrevem suas preferências em videogames, utilizando o modelo MDA para analisar diferentes formas de experiência estética. Foram realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas com 30 millennials de Monterrey, México, distribuídos de forma igualitária por gênero. Os resultados mostram que homens e mulheres compartilham um conjunto comum de experiências estéticas nos jogos, incluindo desafio, narrativa, comunidade, descoberta, fantasia e submissão, mas abordam e combinam essas experiências de maneiras distintas. Os participantes do sexo masculino deram particular importância à narrativa em jogos clássicos de RPG japoneses e à descoberta em jogos de aventura. Quando socializam, valorizam mais o aspecto competitivo do jogo social. As participantes do sexo feminino tendem a misturar experiências estéticas, conectando a narrativa à descoberta e a fantasia à submissão, destacando o engajamento emocional, a cooperação e o relaxamento. As preferências também foram influenciadas pela época em que os jogadores cresceram, especialmente no final dos anos 1990, período que marcou suas primeiras experiências com jogos e gerou vínculos duradouros. Esses resultados sugerem que o prazer estético nos videogames é moldado pela interação entre o design dos jogos, o contexto geracional, as trajetórias sociais e as experiências dos jogadores.

Palavras-chave: Videogames. Gênero. Estética



1 INTRODUCTION

Studies on video game consumption and preferences indicate that gender is an essential factor shaping how people play and which games they enjoy. Research conducted primarily in the United States and Europe suggests that men tend to be more competitive and experienced, whereas women often play more casually or across a broader range of games (Terlecki et al., 2011; Phan et al., 2012). Still, both men and women share interests in some aspects of gaming, such as learning new skills, facing challenges, enjoying stories, or playing with others.

Other studies report that competitive and violent games are often associated with men, whereas casual, puzzle, and simulation games are more often linked to women (Juul, 2010; Scharkow et al., 2015; Vermeulen & Van Looy, 2016). At the same time, online spaces can be unwelcoming, and expectations about gender can make it harder for women to participate. Even when women want to play, these factors sometimes push them away (Fox & Tang, 2014; Bryter, 2020).

Recent studies extend beyond genres to examine how players experience games more broadly, including emotional engagement, social connection, and identification with characters. Qualitative studies show that gender, age, and personal histories shape how players interpret stories and characters, producing a variety of experiences that cannot be explained by genre preferences alone (Cruea, 2018; Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019).

In Latin America, Treviño and Cobos (2025a; 2025b) documented differences in how men and women play video games, the devices they prefer, and the reasons they play. The results showed that family, access to technology, and sociocultural context influence how participants approach the hobby. In addition to this research, no study specifically analyzes the video game preferences of Latin American players through the lens of the MDA framework proposed by Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek (2004).

Within this context, given the limited body of research on videogame preferences in Mexico and Latin America from a gender perspective, this article seeks to contribute to the field by examining how videogame tastes are articulated among Mexican millennials. The objective of this research is to compare how Mexican millennial women and men describe their videogame preferences in relation to different forms of aesthetic enjoyment. By doing so, the study aims to revisit existing findings on gendered preferences while situating them within a specific cultural and generational context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study examines video game experiences as a form of cultural consumption through the MDA framework (Hunicke et al., 2004), supported by Gordon Calleja's model of player involvement (2011) and



Marie-Laure Ryan's work (2015) on immersion and interactivity. These approaches provide a foundation for understanding how players engage with video games, particularly at affective, experiential, and aesthetic levels, with a special focus on aesthetics.

Ryan (2015) describes immersion as the process through which players become fully absorbed in a game world. She identifies three types of immersion when playing video games. Spatial immersion is the sense of being inside the game environment, moving through its spaces, discovering its features, and feeling as if one inhabits that world. Temporal immersion concerns the dynamics of the plot, generating a desire to know what will happen next. Finally, emotional immersion involves forming connections with characters or situations, evoking feelings such as empathy, concern, or attachment. Together, these forms of immersion combine with the interactive nature of games, where players' actions can shape outcomes, creating an experience that is both engaging and emotionally resonant. These dimensions are closely linked to interactivity, understood as the player's capacity to shape or influence game events.

Gordon Calleja (2011) developed a model that identifies two main types of involvement. Macro-involvement refers to engagement with the videogame outside the moment of play, including initial attraction to the game, motivation to return to it, and participation in communities around the game. Micro-involvement occurs during direct interaction with the game and comprises six dimensions. These can be described as follows:

Kinesthetic involvement refers to controlling the avatar and developing embodied skills. Spatial involvement refers to the exploration and understanding of virtual environments. Shared involvement emerges from interactions with other agents, human or system-controlled, in cooperative or competitive contexts. Narrative involvement concerns engagement with both pre-scripted and emergent stories. Affective involvement encompasses emotional responses during play, which may or may not align with the intended emotions embedded in the game. Finally, ludic involvement focuses on the decisions players make within the game system and on how they address the consequences of those decisions (Calleja, 2011).

While Calleja's model offers a broad understanding of player experience over time, this article primarily uses it for contextual support. The primary analytical focus is the aesthetic dimension of gameplay, which the MDA framework addresses more directly.

The MDA (Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics) model was initially developed as a formal framework for the design and analysis of video games (Hunicke et al., 2004). It explains how game systems are constructed and ultimately experienced by players. One of the model's core premises is that videogame consumption is inherently unpredictable due to player agency and the multiple ways in which players can interact with a system. This premise distinguishes video games from more linear cultural products and



positions them as media centered on interaction and behavior rather than on unidirectional message transmission.

The MDA model examines games from three interrelated perspectives. Mechanics are the rules, tools, and systems that enable players to take actions in the game. Dynamics emerge when players use those mechanics and observe how the game responds, reacts, or changes as a result of their choices. Aesthetics are the experiences and feelings that arise from play, such as the emotions the game evokes, the sensory feedback it provides, or simply the enjoyment of being in the game world (Hunicke et al., 2004). Together, these three aspects demonstrate how game design shapes the gameplay experience.

Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek classify aesthetics into eight categories. Sensation refers to the pleasure players derive from the senses, such as sight, sound, and touch, in the game. Fantasy involves players entering a virtual world and experiencing it as their own. Narrative refers to the story itself, including the characters, events, and the unfolding plot, which keeps readers engaged and curious about what happens next. Challenge arises from obstacles or situations in the game that require players to test their skills, try new strategies, or achieve mastery (Riot Games, n.d.). Fellowship is the enjoyment of playing with others, whether friends, family, or other players online, sharing experiences, and having fun together. Discovery is the thrill of exploring, finding hidden items, or seeing parts of the game world you haven't noticed before. Expression occurs when players can make choices that reveal who they are, personalize their play, or be creative in their interactions with the game. Submission refers to playing in a relaxed manner, enjoying the game without pressure or high expectations. These aesthetics describe different ways in which players derive enjoyment and meaning from video games, and they often overlap within a single play experience.

Industry-oriented explanations of the MDA aesthetics further clarify their experiential dimension. For example, sensation involves visual, auditory, and tactile feedback that produces immediate pleasure; challenge emphasizes mastery and decision-making in the face of increasing difficulty; fellowship focuses on shared play and cooperation; fantasy allows players to inhabit fictional roles; narrative centers on experiencing a story as it unfolds; discovery rewards exploration and curiosity; expression enables creativity and individuality; and submission refers to low-effort play associated with relaxation and passing time (Riot Games, n.d.). These descriptions reinforce the idea that aesthetics are not abstract design features, but lived experiences shaped through interaction.

From a cultural perspective, aesthetics do not operate universally or neutrally. They acquire meaning within specific contexts, shaped by players' histories, expectations, and social positions, including gender. In this sense, aesthetics function as a link between game design, player experience, and cultural



consumption. Analyzing aesthetics helps elucidate how pleasure, identification, and rejection are integral to everyday gaming practices.

In this study, the MDA framework is primarily used to analyze the aesthetic dimension of gameplay, understood as the set of emotional and meaningful responses that emerge from interaction with video games. The analysis focuses on how these aesthetics are experienced, interpreted, and valued by Mexican millennial women and men, who are considered a group of players situated within global videogame cultures. Although there are similarities between Calleja's dimensions of involvement and the aesthetics proposed in the MDA model, the two approaches are not equivalent. While Calleja's framework helps explain player engagement beyond the moment of play, the MDA model allows this study to focus more directly on aesthetic experience as a key element for understanding videogame consumption from a gendered and contextual perspective.

METHODOLOGY

From a qualitative perspective, this study analyzes the experiences of millennial women and men with video games, particularly their consumption practices and the aesthetic dimensions of these experiences. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary research tool, as they enable detailed exploration of participants' perspectives, experiences, and specific circumstances (Taylor & Bogdan, 1987).

The interview corpus analyzed in this study forms part of a broader qualitative research project. Previous publications have examined this material from various analytical perspectives (Treviño et al., 2024; Treviño, 2025), whereas the present study focuses specifically on aesthetic preferences using the MDA framework. Across this broader project, the interviews explored participants' trajectories as players and their current play practices and preferences.

Participants were selected using snowball sampling, in which initial participants were recruited and asked to refer others who met the study criteria. These criteria included being a millennial, born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019), actively playing video games, and residing in the Monterrey metropolitan area, Nuevo León, Mexico. Applying these criteria helped reduce potential variation in the results and ensured greater homogeneity within the study population, thereby facilitating comparison of the experiences analyzed.

To achieve a broad understanding of the phenomenon, the study aimed to reach theoretical saturation, understood as the point at which additional interviews no longer provide new insights (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). This saturation was reached through 30 interviews, equally distributed between 15



men and 15 women, which supported the development of analytical categories based on participants' accounts.

To examine these interviews, an interpretative qualitative approach was adopted. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed manually through an iterative process based on close reading and constant comparison. This allowed for the identification of recurring themes, as well as patterns, convergences, and contrasts in participants' descriptions of their gameplay experiences

This process combined deductive and inductive strategies. The MDA framework provided an initial set of categories, particularly regarding aesthetic dimensions such as challenge, narrative, community, discovery, fantasy, and submission. At the same time, the categories remained open to patterns emerging from the data, allowing them to be refined in light of participants' accounts. This resulted in a flexible yet systematic interpretation of the interviews, grounded in both theory and the empirical material.

Participants were informed, both before and during the interviews, that the conversations would be recorded, treated as confidential, and not shared with third parties, and that their participation would remain anonymous. After these conditions were explained, all participants agreed to take part voluntarily. To protect their identities, a coding system was used that combines the interview number with the participant's gender and age. For example, the first female participant was identified as I1F33 (Interviewee 1; Female, 33 years old), and the last male participant as I15M36 (Interviewee 15; Male, 36 years old).

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

PREFERRED AESTHETICS OF FEMALE PARTICIPANTS

In the following section, the responses of the female interviewees regarding their favorite video game genres and specific games are analyzed. The most frequently mentioned aesthetic among female players was challenge (Hunicke et al., 2004), as they tended to focus on the game objectives, placing less importance on competition with other players and greater emphasis on self-improvement.

This was especially evident in fighting games, where one female interviewee described feeling rewarded and proud after mastering complex special moves with the character King of *The King of Fighters* series. Similarly, another female interviewee reported feeling satisfied after defeating all characters in *Mortal Kombat's* (1992) single-player mode.



King of Fighters is all about precision and being rewarded for doing things the right way, at the right moment, and for reading your opponent. It is much more strategic than it looks. For me, it was something to be proud of to be able to pull off all of King's special moves and combos, because not everyone could do that. (I14F40)

In the case of *Mortal Kombat*, I remember that I would really focus, especially when I was playing the single-player mode and had to beat several bosses as the game got harder. It was this mix of factors, such as always thinking about what I was going to do next. And when I finally won, even after several tries, I felt... I think I felt accomplished, or something like that. Satisfied. (I11F30)

Other genres in which female players focused on challenge included strategy and resource-management games. Interviewee 10 explained that she enjoys Tycoon games, where players manage resources and plan cities, theme parks, or hospitals, because she finds this type of gameplay challenging. Similarly, interviewee 12 referred to military strategy games that focus on managing war campaigns, specifically mentioning *R.U.S.E.* (2010).

I really like Tycoon games, you know, the ones where you build things, economic simulation games. Building, planning, and dealing with strategic challenges or simulation stuff. They could probably be called simulation games rather than just Tycoon. (I10F30)

I like strategy games, like *R.U.S.E.* They're military campaigns, kind of set in World War II. What I like about strategy games is that they're difficult, the challenge. (I12F30)

Some female players reported experiences in which the aesthetic of challenge led to introspection, although in different ways. For one interviewee, the challenge arose from revisiting *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998), in which modifying its structure transformed a familiar experience into a new mental puzzle that evoked personal memories. Similarly, another interviewee described repeated failures in *Returnal* (2021), which prompted self-reflection and awareness of her own attitudes while playing. In both situations, difficulty functioned as a trigger for introspection, either through memory or self-knowledge.

It's like a hack you add to different games. With *Ocarina of Time*, it changes the order of all the items in the chests, even the Skulltulas. So it becomes a really interesting puzzle, because you have to figure out how far you can get with the items you have and which chests you can access. I find it a very interesting mental challenge because



it's based on my memories of playing the game as a kid, but at the same time, it feels new, because it changes every time. (I1F33)

Returnal... yeah, I think it's called a roguelike or something like that. I was very close to quitting the game because it kept beating me. That's where I realized that, if you really know how to play, you end up learning personal things about yourself. That game taught me a lot about myself that I hadn't noticed before, mostly about my attitudes. (E4M27)

Overall, these accounts show that the aesthetic of challenge goes beyond achievement or satisfaction. For these female participants, the challenge was not only about learning the game or reaching goals; it also provided an opportunity to reflect on past experiences, examine how they responded to mistakes, and become aware of their own approach to playing. In this way, difficulty became a meaningful and personal part of the experience.

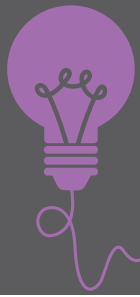
For these female players, the challenge often prompted reflection, but playing with others felt different. In multiplayer games, players focused more on cooperating and having fun with friends than on competing, which aligns with the aesthetic of fellowship. Rather than linking this aesthetic to a specific genre, they described how playing together transforms games into shared social experiences in which the primary value lies in spending time with others and enjoying play collectively.

Nintendo games really appeal to me because they're really focused on playing together, on spending time with others. I really like *Mario Party*; I have all of them. For me, Nintendo is about socializing. When someone comes over, I usually take out the Wii, and the first game I pick is *Mario Party* because it feels like a board game, but on a console. (I10F30)

Shooters, whether first- or third-person, I don't really enjoy them on my own. But if I'm playing with my friends, then I do play with them, and I have fun. So yeah, for playing with friends, I like shooters, but playing one by myself, not so much. (I6F32)

Similarly, interviewee 14 described enjoying playing *Minecraft* (2011) cooperatively with her friends, linking the game to shared memories and anecdotes. One of the experiences she found most enjoyable was playing on a shared server with a friend living in Japan, which enabled them to build and interact despite being in different time zones.

When we played *Minecraft*, we could be in completely different places. One of our friends spent about a year in Japan and still played *Minecraft* with us because the



server was open 24 hours. So, we would wake up and see what he had built while he was over there in Japan. We have numerous stories of events that occurred in *Minecraft* as a team. (I14F40)

When the female interviewees were asked about their multiplayer experiences, they rarely identified a specific genre. Instead, they focused on whether a game allowed them to play with others and share the experience. What they valued most was spending time together, talking, and enjoying the game as a group, leaving competition as an afterthought. For most of them, winning was less important than the social interaction itself and the pleasure of playing with friends.

A similar pattern emerges in how several female players described discovery and narrative. When discussing role-playing and open-world adventure games, exploration and story are often treated as closely connected. Moving freely through large environments was meaningful to them because it went hand in hand with following the story and becoming involved in it. In this sense, exploration was not an end in itself, but part of a broader narrative experience.

I focused too much on *GTA* [*Grand Theft Auto*] and *Red Dead* [*Redemption*] for a long, long time; only recently have I started playing other games again. Then I moved on to *Spider-Man*, which I also like a lot, and *Horizon*... but I mean, those are also open-world games, like *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, which I am playing. I think they are very similar genres: open-world games with their own stories. (I4F27)

But, for example, *Red Dead Redemption* is... mainly it is [...] open world, right? Open world games are often single player because of how they are, and [...] honestly, I really enjoy my solitude, so to speak. I am not someone who struggles with being alone; I have a good time with myself. And many times, playing video games for me and getting caught up in the story is what I enjoy. (I15F28)

Several female players talked about narrative as something they value more than exploration. In these cases, they explained that they prefer games in which the story is clearly guided and does not become lost in excessive freedom. For them, highly open worlds can disrupt immersion in the story and, in some situations, even feel overwhelming. By contrast, games that are more linear or more intensely focused on storytelling were described as allowing them to remain engaged with the plot and the game's emotional experience. This suggests that, in these cases, the narrative aesthetic takes precedence over discovery, as players value games that let them engage with the story more directly and in a more controlled manner.



There comes a point where open worlds start to stress me out a bit, because what I really want is the story. When it's an open world, you spend a lot of time just moving around while you're exploring. So, I would say that first would be role-playing or open world games, and then I really like more linear story games, like *Hellblade*. These are games with shorter but very strong stories, more like thrillers, with some suspense and all that. (I4F27)

I really like visual novels, like *Phoenix Wright* or *Life Is Strange*. I also loved *Heavy Rain* when I played it. These types of games are really nice. Games like *Heavy Rain* use real actors and all those motion capture dots to record different movements, and that's really cool. I love them because when I want to relax and take things easy, there are very few actions you actually have to do in this kind of game. (I6F32)

Building on the last comment by interviewee I6F32, the aesthetic of submission can be seen in games that female players describe as relaxing, low-pressure experiences. In these accounts, play was described less in terms of challenge or skill and more as a means of slowing down and feeling at ease. *Minecraft* (2011) and *Stardew Valley* (2016) were mentioned because they provide spaces where players can step away from everyday concerns and engage in calm, repetitive activities that do not require constant attention. This relaxed form of play often aligns with the aesthetic of fantasy, as players describe these games as spaces in which they can momentarily forget the real world and inhabit a different, more peaceful life.

Well, farming games... There are a lot of them, but the one I've loved the most lately is *Stardew Valley*. I'm also a big fan of *Animal Crossing*, which isn't exactly a farming game, but it goes hand in hand with that genre. Basically, that's what it is: you have your farm, a bit of adventure where you fight little monsters, you get married to the characters, you have farm animals... It's really just about living life there, harvesting, and doing your own thing. (I7F32)

Usually, I'm really absorbed in the game, like the world can keep spinning, and I don't really care. That happens to me especially with *Minecraft*, which is why I like playing it so much. It's kind of my moment to relax. In *Minecraft*, you can choose to fight, but the fights are very, very simple, nothing too complex. (I14F40)

Overall, the analysis shows that the aesthetic most frequently mentioned by female players was challenge, particularly in relation to self-improvement, focus, and reflective play. This was followed by fellowship, during which enjoyment was derived from cooperation, shared experiences, and social



bonding rather than from competition. Narrative and discovery also emerged in discussions among female interviewees about open-world games and story-driven experiences, as well as about submission and fantasy, which were associated with relaxation, escapism, and low-pressure forms of play. Taken together, these findings suggest that female players engage with a wide range of aesthetic experiences, combining difficulty, social connection, immersion, and rest within their gaming practices.

PREFERRED AESTHETICS OF MALE PARTICIPANTS

In the following section, responses from male players about their favorite game genres and specific titles are analyzed to identify the aesthetics (Hunicke et al., 2004) most appealing to them. Overall, the interviewees showed a clear preference for the narrative aesthetic, as engaging with interactive stories (Ryan, 2015) is one of their main reasons for playing video games. This preference is especially evident in their interest in Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs), the genre most frequently mentioned by male participants, in which story, atmosphere, and music are emphasized as key elements of enjoyment.

JRPGs, as I said before, feel a lot like reading stories. At least the older ones do. They are more like interactive novels, where you play as the character and really feel like the protagonist, which pulls you into the story. Having a good story, a strong atmosphere, and memorable music makes the whole experience much more enjoyable. Games like *Secret of Evermore* on the Super Nintendo, *Final Fantasy VI*, and *Super Mario RPG* are good examples. (I14M36)

RPGs are my favorite genre, mostly... Well, mainly because of the story. What kind of games? For example, *Final Fantasy*, *Mario RPG*, *Persona 5*... I don't know, stuff like that. That would be it. (I9M36)

Beyond the enjoyment of narrative during play, some players maintain a sustained relationship with these games outside of play sessions. This form of engagement can be understood as macro involvement (Calleja, 2011), in which the game remains meaningful through activities such as listening to the soundtrack or watching videos focused on character and story analysis.

I also really like *Final Fantasy*... VI, V, IX, VII, the classics. They are some of my favorite games. I might not replay them as often, or at all, but I still like them a lot. Sometimes I watch YouTube videos, listen to the music, or watch videos analyzing the characters or the story. I feel like they have a lot of material to analyze, and that's what I like about these games. They're my favorites not so much because of the gameplay, but because of the world and the story itself. (I2M35)



Overall, accounts of male players indicate a consistent preference for a narrative aesthetic, mainly in Japanese role-playing games. For these participants, JRPGs stand out not only for their stories but also for the worlds they create, the atmospheres they evoke, and the emotional impact of their music. This combination allows players to engage with games as interactive stories that remain meaningful beyond the moment of play, shaping their enjoyment and their ongoing relationship with these titles.

Social play emerged as an essential aspect of the gaming experience for the male participants, mainly through two aesthetics proposed by Hunnicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek (2004): challenge and fellowship. While fellowship refers to shared play experiences and social interaction, challenge is associated with competition, mastery, and outperforming opponents. In interviewees' accounts, these two aesthetics often intersect; however, competitive challenge tends to be the dominant source of enjoyment.

This preference is especially evident in the participants' discussion of fighting games, which several interviewees identified as one of their favorite genres. For these players, the appeal of fighting games lies primarily in competing against another person and testing skill, rather than in socializing.

Fighting games, I mean, everything that has to do with one-on-one fights: *Smash Bros.*, *Street Fighter*, *King of Fighters*, all of that. Anything related to fighting games, because of the challenge of playing against someone else. A quick match is always a different challenge. That's what draws me to fighting games: playing against someone else, not to socialize, but to win. (I6M37)

I think maybe fighting games [are my favorites], or well, not just fighting games. I think it's more like competitive games in general, whether they're racing games, fighting games, and so on. That whole competitive genre. For example, *Smash*, the *Dragon Ball* games, or *Mario Kart*. (I12M33)

Together, these accounts show how the aesthetic of challenge structures male players' enjoyment of social play, with competition and the desire to outperform others taking precedence over cooperative interaction. However, fellowship is not absent from these experiences. In some cases, competitive games also function as social spaces connected to shared memories and repeated play with others. This is illustrated by interviewee 2, who described fighting game series such as *Super Smash Bros.* and *The King of Fighters* as social experiences that remain meaningful over time, partly because of the memories associated with playing them with others:

For example, *Smash Bros. Ultimate* [is one of my favorite games], because it still entertains me. I could play it endlessly with other people; that one really is a social game. And maybe *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* or some fighting games like *King of Fighters*



XIII or 2002. Those fighting games are my favorites. I have memories associated with them; they're fun, and when I play them, I have fun again as I did before. (I2M35)

In this case, fellowship complements rather than replaces the aesthetic of challenge, as social interaction enhances the competitive experience without becoming its primary focus.

As shown in the last comment of interviewee I2M35, social play for male players is not always centered on competition. In some cases, enjoyment is linked to fellowship, as the focus shifts from winning to spending time together and enjoying the activity itself. This can be seen in the following comments, where players enjoyed playing together with family members:

Shooters end up being the ones I like the most, mainly because I've spent more time with them, and that's how I end up hanging out with my cousins. We end up playing *Call of Duty* and get first place in the battle royale. Right now, the shooter I like the most is *Apex Legends*, but we're always playing different ones. That's what I've really enjoyed. (I5M32)

I really like all the *Guitar Hero* games. I never had the drums or the guitars when I was younger, but my cousins did, and they would invite us over. More recently, during the pandemic, my brothers and I bought the drums, two guitars, and a microphone. We went back to that a bit. We don't play very often, maybe twice a year when we can, but I really enjoy it. What I enjoy the most is playing with my brothers. (I7M29)

Together, these accounts show that, alongside competition and challenge, fellowship also plays an essential role in male players' social gaming practices, particularly in contexts where cooperation, shared memories, and time spent with family are more important than winning.

Another vital aesthetic for male participants was discovery, which was strongly associated with adventure games that emphasize exploration and open worlds. Players described enjoying the freedom to move through large virtual spaces, discover hidden locations, and explore the environment. In these accounts, exploration functions as a relaxing and rewarding activity, often independent from narrative progression. *The Legend of Zelda* series emerged as the clearest example of this aesthetic, particularly *Ocarina of Time* (1998) and *Breath of the Wild* (2017).

I like adventure games, for example, the *Zelda* games, um... all these games that let you explore, you know? That focus on the world, that lets you explore, have an open world, whatever it is, and let you move everywhere, all of that. I like all those types of games. (I12M33)



In *Ocarina of Time*, you're this person who has to travel, go through all these places, and everything. I think that's what I liked, and the theme was kind of like that too, a bit gothic, with monsters. (I1M34)

In addition to discovery, the aesthetic of fantasy was also prominent in the experiences described by male players. This aesthetic emerges when games are used to disconnect from everyday life and immerse oneself in alternative worlds or situations. For the participants, fantasy does not necessarily imply magical or unreal settings, but rather the possibility of escaping everyday routines and becoming absorbed in a virtual space. This includes both entirely fictional worlds and simulations that enable players to engage in activities or assume roles they cannot perform in real life.

Minecraft has made me lose a lot of hours of my life (laughs). But I feel that it's because I get immersed in that fake world that isn't my real life, and it really helps me disconnect completely. And in *Minecraft*, there are just so many things to do, so yeah... a lot of time has gone by playing it. (I13M30)

Simulation games like *Euro Truck Simulator*... things that are ordinary but that you can't really do all the time in real life. Driving a truck, working in construction, things like that... those activities where you might say, "Why would you want to do that? Do you really want to work in construction?" Well, no, not really, but I'm curious, and I can spend a day or two as a fictional construction worker to see what a construction worker actually does. (I4M37)

Submission was the last aesthetic identified among the male participants' experiences. Some players reported that they turn to video games to relax or for something to do, rather than to seek demanding challenges (Hunicke et al., 2004; Riot Games, n.d.). In these moments, time tends to fade into the background, as they simply keep playing. Players describe enjoyment as coming from extended play sessions, often without paying much attention to the passage of time. Strategy and management games appear frequently in these accounts, not because they are simple, but because their structured mechanics allow players to fall into a steady, comfortable pattern of play.

Well, there's a genre I haven't mentioned that I really like, because when I play those games, I can stay playing for a whole day, like 24 hours. Those kinds of management games, what do they call them, Tycoon games. One came out recently about *Jurassic Park*, where you build the park, the *Jurassic Park* zoo, and I love those games. (I8M33)



In the end, I think I would go with strategy games, like *Age of Empires*. After so many years, I still love that it's around, that it was remastered, and I can lose hours playing it. That's the only bad thing, that you already know each match takes at least an hour, so sometimes it's like, either I don't play them, or I leave it for later. (I5M32)

For male participants, narrative was clearly the primary source of enjoyment. They repeatedly mentioned Japanese role-playing games, particularly the *Final Fantasy* series, and focused on the story, characters, music, and overall atmosphere. Some interviewees reported that these elements persisted even after they stopped playing. Challenge was important too, especially when players could test themselves against others. They liked seeing how much they could improve and the feeling of winning or outplaying someone. Fellowship was also mentioned, primarily in games with friends or family, where social interaction and friendly competition often went hand in hand.

Other aesthetics appeared less often but were still mentioned. Discovery was a feature of adventure games such as *The Legend of Zelda* series, in which exploring the world and finding new items was part of the fun. Fantasy was about stepping into other worlds or taking on different roles, offering a break from everyday life. Submission showed up in games that let players relax and take it easy, especially management or strategy titles that were low-pressure and easy to enjoy. Taken together, these findings suggest that male players combine narrative engagement, competition, exploration, immersion, social interaction, and moments of rest within their gaming practices.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings show that both male and female players share similar experiences in games, as described by the MDA framework (Hunicke et al., 2004). Still, they tend to focus on and combine these experiences in different ways. Rather than pointing to rigid gendered preferences, the results highlight distinct patterns in how challenge, narrative, community, discovery, fantasy, and submission are experienced and articulated by each group.

For male players, narrative stood out as the most critical aesthetic. The interviewees discussed the games they played, particularly Japanese role-playing games such as the *Final Fantasy* series, which continue to have an emotional impact on them today. These preferences reflect the influence of the PlayStation 1 and Nintendo 64 era, which shaped the gaming trajectories of many millennial players. In contrast, female players also valued narrative, but tended to associate it with more recent titles such as *Heavy Rain* (2010) and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017). In these cases, storytelling was often linked to emotional engagement and immersion rather than nostalgia associated with childhood or adolescence.



Discovery also played an important role, although it was framed differently across groups. Male players commonly discussed discovery through *The Legend of Zelda* series, emphasizing exploration, freedom of movement, and the pleasure of navigating expansive virtual worlds, sometimes placing narrative in a secondary position. Female players, on the other hand, referred to discovery through a more diverse set of games, including the *Grand Theft Auto* series and *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), where exploration and narrative were closely intertwined. This suggests that women more frequently experienced discovery in combination with narrative, while men tended to discuss these aesthetics as more distinct forms of enjoyment.

Community-based enjoyment revealed both overlaps and clear contrasts. Male participants frequently associated social play with competitive experiences, particularly through the *Super Smash Bros.* franchise, which they framed as a space for direct competition and skill comparison. Female participants, by contrast, mentioned fighting games such as *The King of Fighters* series primarily in single-player modes, describing them as opportunities for self-improvement rather than as forms of competition. In addition, women often emphasized cooperative, shared play in less competitive contexts, referring to family gatherings, friendships, and nostalgic memories of playing together, particularly in games like the *Mario Party* series. These examples illustrate how the same aesthetic of community can be structured through very different dynamics of play.

Both groups also engaged with fantasy and submission, particularly as ways of experiencing alternative lives and relaxing through play. *Minecraft* (2011) stood out as a relatively modern title mentioned by both men and women, functioning primarily as a submission-oriented experience in which players could lose track of time while engaging in activities perceived as low-pressure. Simulation and management games further illustrate these shared tendencies. Female players referred to titles such as *Stardew Valley* (2016) as spaces to imagine and inhabit everyday roles, such as managing a farm. In contrast, male players mentioned games like *Euro Truck Simulator* (2008) and management-focused titles such as *Jurassic World Evolution* (2018), emphasizing curiosity and immersion in systems that simulate unfamiliar professions. In these cases, games enabled players to inhabit different lives temporarily, reinforcing fantasy through submission rather than challenge.

Both groups also mentioned strategy and management games, although they were experienced in distinct ways. Male players often described becoming deeply absorbed in long sessions of planning and resource management, highlighting immersion and sustained engagement. Female players, in contrast, framed these genres more explicitly as relaxing experiences or as ways to pass the time. Despite these differences, both groups associated these games with immersion and a reduced awareness of time passing.



Although sensation and expression were less prominent than other aesthetics, they were indirectly evident in players' engagement with games such as *Minecraft* (2011) and *Stardew Valley* (2016). In these games, constructing buildings or managing virtual spaces provided opportunities for creativity and personal expression while also promoting relaxation. These activities contributed to immersion (Ryan, 2015), as players became absorbed in the game world, and reflected multiple dimensions of micro-involvement (Calleja, 2011), including kinesthetic, spatial, affective, and ludic involvement. In this way, sensation and expression supported the enjoyment of other aesthetic experiences such as fantasy, discovery, and submission.

Overall, the analysis shows that male and female players engage with a shared set of game aesthetics but organize it differently within their gaming practices. Male players more often discussed aesthetics as separate experiential dimensions, such as narrative, challenge, or discovery. In contrast, female players tended to combine them, particularly narrative with discovery and fantasy with submission. These differences suggest that aesthetic enjoyment is not only shaped by game design but also by players' trajectories, social contexts, and ways of engaging with games over time.

In this sense, the MDA framework, while initially developed as a model to support game design and analysis, also functions as a productive analytical lens for comparing player experiences. By focusing on aesthetics as lived and articulated forms of enjoyment, this approach contributes to discussions on player-centered design. It shows how players actively construct meaning through play, and how these meanings are shaped by generational context, play histories, and social practices, rather than being fixed by design alone. While the findings are grounded in a specific group of Mexican millennials, they offer insights that can inform future research on player experience, gender, and game design in other contexts.

REFERENCES

BLACKBURN, G.; SCHARRER, E. Video Game Playing and Beliefs about Masculinity Among Male and Female Emerging Adults. *Sex Roles*, v. 80, p. 310–324, 2019. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-018-0934-4>. Accessed: Dec. 19, 2025.

BRYTER. **Female gamers survey 2020**. Women in Games, 2020. Available at: <https://www.womenin-games.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Bryter-Female-Gamers-Survey-2020-12.11.20-SHORT-no-quotes.pdf>. Accessed: Dec. 19, 2025.

CALLEJA, G. **In-game: from immersion to incorporation**. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2011.



CRUEA, M. (Re)reading fatherhood: Applying reader response theory to Joel's father role in *The Last of Us*. In: CONSALVO, M.; CARTER, C. (Ed.). **Masculinities in play**. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. p. 115–128. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90581-5_6. Accessed: Dec. 19, 2025.

DIMOCK, M. Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins. **Pew Research Center**, 17 jan. 2019. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>. Accessed on: 19 Dec. 2025.

FOX, J.; TANG, W. Y. Sexism in online video games: The role of conformity to masculine norms and social dominance orientation. **Computers in Human Behavior**, v. 33, p. 314–320, 2014. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.07.014>. Accessed: Dec. 19, 2025.

HUNICKE, R.; LEBLANC, M.; ZUBEK, R. **MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research**. Technical Report, Northwestern University, 2004. Available at: <https://users.cs.northwestern.edu/~hunicke/MDA.pdf>. Accessed: Dec. 19, 2025.

JUUL, J. **A casual revolution: Reinventing video games and their players**. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2010.

PHAN, M. H.; JARDINA, J. R.; CHAPARRO, B. S. Examining the role of gender in video game usage, preference, and behavior. In: **Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Annual Meeting**, v. 56, n. 1, p. 1496–1500, 2012. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1071181312561297>. Accessed: Dec. 19, 2025.

RAHIMI, S.; KHATOONI, M. Saturation in qualitative research: An evolutionary concept analysis. **International Journal of Nursing Studies Advances**, v. 6, 100174, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijn-sa.2024.100174>

RIOT GAMES. **Module 1: Game Feeling & 8 Kinds of Fun**. URF Academy, n.d. Available at: <https://www.riotgames.com/en/urf-academy/fun-and-feeling>. Accessed: Dec. 19, 2025.

RYAN, M. L. **Narrative as virtual reality 2: Revisiting immersion and interactivity in literature and electronic media**. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015. Available at: <https://atraf.ir/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/revayat-vagheiyate-majazi.pdf>. Accessed: Dec. 19, 2025.

SCHARKOW, M.; FESTL, R.; VOGELGESANG, J.; QUANDT, T. Beyond the “core-gamer”: Genre preferences and gratifications in computer games. **Computers in Human Behavior**, v. 44, p. 293–298, 2015. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1037/t38308-000>. Accessed: Dec. 19, 2025.



TAYLOR, S. J.; BOGDAN, R. **Introducción a los métodos cualitativos de investigación**. Ediciones Paidós, 1987.

TERLECKI, M.; BROWN, J.; HARNER-STECIW, L. et al. Sex differences and similarities in video game experience, preferences, and self-efficacy: Implications for the gaming industry. **Current Psychology**, v. 30, p. 22–33, 2011. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-010-9095-5>. Accessed: Dec. 19, 2025.

TREVIÑO, R. **El involucramiento como mediación en las lecturas de personajes femeninos en videojuegos**: un estudio comparativo entre jugadoras y jugadores. 2025. Tese (Doutorado em Estudos Humanísticos) - Tecnológico de Monterrey, Monterrey, 2025. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11285/703868>. Accessed on: March 23, 2026.

TREVIÑO, R.; COBOS, T. L. Gamers en América Latina: Análisis comparativo de su iniciación, prácticas y preferencias según género. **Dixit**, v. 39, e4423, 2025a. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.22235/d.v39.4423>. Accessed: Dec. 19, 2025.

TREVIÑO, R.; COBOS, T. L. Explorando la trayectoria de las videojugadoras latinoamericanas: Iniciación, influencias y relevancia cotidiana. **Austral Comunicación**, v. 14, n. 3, 2025b. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.26422/aucom.2025.1403.tre>. Accessed: Dec. 19, 2025.

TREVIÑO, R.; MAZA, M.; MAEDA, C. Haciendo las paces con Peach: interpretaciones de videojugadoras mexicanas sobre personajes femeninos en videojuegos. **Contratexto**, Lima, n. 41, p. 149-165, 2024. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.26439/contratexto2024.n41.6638>. Accessed on: March 23, 2026.

VERMEULEN, L.; VAN LOOY, J. BI play so I am? A gender study into stereotype perception and genre choice of digital game players. **Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media**, v. 60, n. 2, p. 286–304, 2016. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2016.1164169>. Accessed: Dec. 19, 2025.