Loading… The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association
Vol 17(28): 20-35
http://loading.gamestudies.ca

Rusty World: A Working Paper on Video Games and Social Class

Alan O'Connor
Trent University
aoconnor@trentu.ca

Abstract

This working paper provides a preliminary treatment of issues of social class in relation to the video game *Rust* as it is played on servers and streamed on Twitch. The paper uses the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu to explore *Rust* as a field and to describe the social class *habitus* of those who play and stream the game.

Keywords

Rust video game; sociology; Pierre Bourdieu; field; habitus

Introduction

I have played the video game *Rust* on most days for the past eight years. I go online even on busy days, just to make sure my base has not been raided. On many days it is a relaxing twenty minutes in an otherwise demanding workday. I have over 4,000 hours in the game, much less than professional players who often have more than 10,000 hours, but still significant. Writing about the game is in part a matter of reading from the ever-expanding literature on video games and in part reflection on my own experience in the game. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu speaks of anamnesis, or a bringing to consciousness of social practices that in the ordinary way we don't think about very much. Writing about the video game *Rust* is a process of anamnesis, becoming aware of things in game play that I had mostly taken for granted but now I am starting to write down. That is why I call this a working paper about video games and about the game *Rust* in particular. This paper is offered in the spirit of the working papers of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* founded by Bourdieu in 1975, and the mimeographed working papers of the Institute for Social Research from the 1930s.

The Game of *Rust*

Rust is a multiplayer survival game developed by Facepunch Studies. An early version was released on Steam in December 2013 and there have been continual updates to the game since then, some of these substantially changing the game. *Rust* is sometimes described as Minecraft for adults because it has a similar sandbox design. The back story is that social order has broken down because of a nuclear accident, though this is rarely discussed by players. Characters spawn on the shore of a hostile environment with a rock and torch and must harvest items such as wood,

stone and metal. Food is available from plants such as corn and pumpkins, and from killing animals such as deer, boars, wolves and bears (the most dangerous to players). Although it is possible to play as a solo player, this is difficult because of natural dangers and the hostility of other players. Teams work together to build bases to protect their resources and to prevent others from raiding their base with crafted rockets and explosives. The artwork of the game has a retro feel; many designs have the feel of the period from WWII to the Vietnam Era. There is no endgame (or dragon to slay), though shooting down a helicopter with the possibility of obtaining valuable military items is a real challenge. The game developers have encouraged PvP combat, for example, over regular parachute airdrops from military planes which sometimes contain valuable items. A raid on another base makes a great deal of noise and this invariably attracts other players to counter-raid. *Rust* is a sandbox game and there is no determined path or set tasks to perform. Although the back-story is the complete breakdown of social norms, there seems to be some residual military organization that sends helicopter patrols and drops items from planes by parachute.

Figure 1: ShackyHD is a popular *Rust* streamer on Twitch

Although it is not what Nick Dyer-Witheford (2009) calls a game of multitude (of resistance to the dominant culture) it has some progressive aspects, which may be in part due to that fact that the game is developed in Britain and not in the United States. For example, new players are randomly assigned a gender and race when they purchase the game. There is no doubt that this is intended as a progressive feature and a challenge to boy-dominated gaming (Newman, 2016). The back story of the game is that there has been a catastrophic nuclear accident which stops industrial development in the 1960s or 1970s. The accident is apparently the fault of a corporation called Cobalt which has an uncanny resemblance to Elon Musk's corporate empire. A torn poster advertising Cobalt shows the CEO with the message: The Future is Out There.

The map initially has a generous amount of trees. But as these are cut down by players they are slow to regenerate. I have often made a base hidden in a wooded area and after a few days my base has no tree cover and is visible to all. Unwanted items can be sold to other players (reuse) or turned into resources at recycling stations (recycle). Plant food has seeds which can be replanted on open terrain or in walled gardens. High quality seeds can be cloned to improve crop yields. In *Rust* avatars have to drink water and eat food to maintain body health. Vegetables such as corn and pumpkins provide good nutrition. It is also possible to set a fish trap made of wood and cloth or use a fishing rod and bait. Compared to other games there is a significant amount of environmental consciousness in *Rust*. There are cars, motorbikes, helicopters and trains but it is also possible to travel by horse and bicycle. Much travel is done simply by running. There is no central electric system in *Rust* (a nuclear power plant is badly damaged) but it is possible to install solar panels, windmills and batteries, which can power lights and other items for your base. Some mining of minerals is possible in *Rust* but there are no oilfields. The Cobalt corporation which was responsible for industrial development and apparently caused a nuclear accident has mostly collapsed. However it has a residual military capability (helicopters and scientists in hazmat suits) which sometimes threatens players. In spite of the damage done by industry to the *Rust* environment, the earth is regenerating and the landscape is sometimes quite beautiful. Wild animals are returning, though fish traps sometimes capture empty plastic bottles.

From Metagame to Sociology

An extensive literature on video games describe the uncertain boundary between game and social life. Consalvo et al. (2025) give a summary of Richard Garfield's concept of a metagame:

- what a player brings to the game
- what a player takes away from the game
- what happens between games
- what happens during the game other than the game itself

Mia Consalvo's research contributes to this way of thinking. However her discussion of the metagame is limited only to the field of gaming. Between games, the player may consult a guide or watch a tutorial on YouTube. They return to the game with increased knowledge and as better players. However, the most important thing that happens between games is that the player goes to work, or to school. In other words, what the player brings to the game is not only their prior experiences of gaming but their cultural capital in general, based on the social class of their parents, the kind of school they attend, the neighbourhood in which they live. The answers to Garfield's questions is not to be found in the game but in a sociology of game players. This includes class *habitus* (parents' occupations, level of education) and social class as it is lived out in gender, race, rural/urban divides, etc. To put this in another way, Consalvo's concept of 'gaming capital' is actually based on a misinterpretation of Bourdieu's sociology. Gaming capital seems enclosed in the world of video games. But it is clear that Bourdieu would treat gaming as a field and would seek to show the genesis and structure of the field. He would then

seek to investigate the *habitus* of those who enter and take up positions within the field (Bourdieu, 2018, 2020).

There is general agreement that the world of video games has changed dramatically in the last twenty years (van Dreunen, 2010; Jensen, Fynbo, Hansen, 2025). It is clear that the idea of the game as a world apart, something that takes place inside a magic circle, is no longer adequate. Many games are now played on servers with up to three hundred or four hundred on-line participants. Consalvo and her research team (2025) found that millions of people stream their video game play on Twitch with no expectation that anyone is watching.

Ping: *Rust* is played on servers. Some of these are operated by Facepunch Studios, but many are run by independent operators (Rustafied, Rusty Moose). Where the server is located affects the experience of the game. Europe and North America are the best provided. A player in Argentina typically has higher ping and this can mean the difference between winning and losing a fight. In the worst circumstances with the greatest latency, the game can be virtually unplayable.

Computer specs: There is wide agreement that the video game *Rust* is poorly optimized. Some blame the engine on which the game is built. This means that it is difficult to play with a cheap computer. To successfully play the game you might need an upgrade. Many streamers on Twitch provide their computer specs as a service to players who need to upgrade their home computer. The difficulty of playing *Rust* on cheap computers actually adds to the audience on Twitch as players give up trying to run the game themselves and instead watch someone else play *Rust*.

Table 1: Dyanna computer specs

CPU: AMD Ryzen 7 7800X3D
Motherboard: X670E AORUS GigaByte
Graphics card: NVIDIA 4070 TI GigaByte Aerocool Snow
Mouse: Zowie Divina FK2-B Pink
Keyboard: Razer Huntsman mini
Monitor: BENQ EX2780Q
Headset: HyperX Ear Buds
Microphone : Shure MV7
Chair : Herman Miller Embody
Cooler : Corsair H150i
Case: Thermaltake AH T700
RAM : A-Data RB 32GB DDR5 6000mhz
Webcam : DSLR SONY A6000

Source: Twitch, March 2025

Craig Watkins and his research team (2018) describe how high-school students in a disadvantaged suburb of Austin, Texas struggle to get access to the internet. The school actually has a Game Studies computer lab but the teacher does not have the training and background to teach the subject. Sims (2014) compares privileged and non-privileged youth in New York City alternative school. It is the privileged white students who play video games (*Modern Warfare* 2),

made possible by good computers and home internet access. She reports that parents dislike the game but nonetheless tolerate it. While van Dijk (2005) suggests that the digital divide is still widening, Robinson (2009) describes some strategies used by working class people to cope.

Cheating: *Rust* has always had a problem with cheating. It used to be mostly players d-dossing the server to give them an advantage while other players are stuttering. In recent years aim bots have become common, as well as ESP (which allows a player to see through walls), and it has become common to hear people say that the game has become unplayable because of cheaters. Some advanced players change their style of play on the assumption that their opponents are actually cheating. In her book on cheating in video games, Consalvo (2007) shows that there is a continuum of practices from reading a magazine that provides helpful hints to purchasing cheats that give the player an advantage in an online game. In her discussion it is clear that the idea of a 'magic circle' within which the game only takes place is unconvincing.

Trolls: Field notes from playing *Rust* and watching it on Twitch are full of descriptions of racist and homophobic slurs. These occur in game voice (players who are near can talk to each other), in chat and on painted signs in the game. My field notes from 2017 record explicit racism and homophobia twice or three times a week. This screenshot is a proxy for a large collection of signs with racist and homophobic slurs. Jorgensen and Karlsen (2018) explore issues of transgression in game play.

Figure 2: A painted sign on a *Rust* server

Gambling: To play a video game such as *Rust* is a gamble (Martinelli, 2017; Mirowski, 2020). What will the next loot crate contain? Players sometimes pray aloud for a particular item: please give me a pipe shotgun. The introduction of an aim cone into the game brings an element of random luck in shooting a weapon. (This is strongly resisted by many longtime *Rust* players who

want it to be a game of skill in shooting a weapon with a learnable recoil.) It is also possible to gamble in-game using scrap. A monument such as the trading Outpost offers recreation including a casino. It is now also possible to play the game Rock Paper Scissors with other players on the same server and this is often done for a wager. The purchase of skins as a investment, with the idea of selling them when the price rises, is also a kind of speculation.

Streaming *Rust*: Participants do not just play video games. They frequently watch it streamed on Twitch (Partin, 2020; Sjoblom, 2018; Taylor, 2018). It is possible to play the game at home and watch an expert playing it live on Twitch at the same time. Stream-sniping means discovering the server being used by a streamer, playing on that same server and using information from the live stream to entrap the streamer (This is usually sufficient grounds to have the stream sniper banned). More generally, the existence of Twitch becomes part of the gaming experience. One reason to watch is to learn how to play the game better, for example to memorize the geography of a monument and improve one's play.[1]

Houssard and others (2023) point out that even within the top 10,000 streamers on Twitch there is a great deal of inequality. This is reinforced by Twitch not having a significant recommendation system. People tend to stay with the most popular streamers. Twitch is not an egalitarian platform. There is a huge gap between the earnings of the top streamers and the vast majority of streamers. About two million people stream on Twitch and most of these earn very little money from this activity (Twitch was purchased by Amazon in 2014 for $970 million). Johnson and Woodcock (2019a, 2019b) call this 'aspirational labour' because beginning streamers hope to become full-time professionals even though this rarely happens.

Table 2: Gini Index measure of income inequality

complete equality	0
all income goes to one person	100
Norway	22.7
Canada	31.7
United States	39.8
South Africa	63
Top 10,000 Twitch streamers	57
Estimate for all Twitch streamers	93

Source: World Population Review.

If all two million Twitch streamers were a country, it would be the country with the most unequal distribution of income in the world. Norway has the most equal distribution of income.

[1] From my experience attempts by Steam to establish itself as social media are mostly unsuccessful. Players prefer to communicate with each other using Discord. However, Steam is successful at taxing transactions such as the purchase and sale of in-game skins. As Thorhauge (2024) argues, the platform taxes the metagame.

South Africa has the least equal distribution. A Gini Index of 40 marks a country with serious problems of income inequality.

Steam and other platforms: Many people who play are also on Discord. It is almost impossible to play *Rust* in a team without a Discord channel used by the team to communicate. Streamers can also notify their followers when they are going online using a platform such as Twitter-X. It is also possible to get a *Rust* app for smartphone. This notifies you (for example) that your base is being raided and you need to get online to defend your base in-game.

The conclusion is that the expanded concept of metagame leads inevitably to a sociological theory of video games. Joost van Dreunen says that for many young gamers 'playing is an excuse for hanging out with other people' (as cited in Small, 2024). This social aspect has become a driving force in game design and popularity. Playing a video game like *Rust* is a social activity and can be studied using the ordinary tools and concepts of sociology. My own approach draws on the sociology of Bourdieu which examines the relation between social class *habitus* (measured by occupation and education; for young players we use their parents' data) and gaming considered as a *field* (Bourdieu, 2018, 2020).

Sociology of Video Games

This working paper is part of a new generation in video games studies, starting with Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (2005). Castronova moves beyond considering video games as narrative or as a 'magic circle' with rules that are different from everyday life. He repeatedly stresses that the barrier between game and non-game social activity is permeable and shifting. In other words, video games may be studied as a leisure activity. This working paper is about an open-ended sandbox game, though the idea of narrative is certainly valid for other games. The concept of a 'magic circle' also has some relevance. Snowmers is playing *Rust* in 2025 on a high-population server, and is somewhat distracted by Twitch chat, perhaps also by his smartphone which is on his gaming table. Chat tells him to 'lock in' and focus on the win, just as his tennis coach might tell him to concentrate on his game.

My own contribution is to add the work of Bourdieu who studies leisure and social class in France in his classic *Distinction* (1984). It should immediately be said that for Bourdieu social class is lived as differences in gender, race, age, whether you live in a big city or a rural area and other distinctions. But this is not a theory of intersectionality. What Bourdieu calls a *habitus* (by this he means something like a lifestyle) is always a lifeworld structured by systemic inequality. There is a small body of literature on video games and uses of the internet that uses Bourdieu's sociology. Vilasis-Pamos and Perez-Latorre (2022) examine social class and video games among youth in Barcelona. DeVane and Squire (2008) look at gaming among 'at risk' teens in the Midwest, USA. Robinson (2009) uses Bourdieu to study social class differences in access to the internet in an agricultural region in California. Hollingsworth and a research team (2011) find that in England there are differences by social class and that working parents are more wary of the 'dangers' of video games. They tend to restrict access for their children, limiting the possibility of playing online. Christopher Paul confirms the importance of family *habitus*: 'When I was young, teachers told me that video games were a waste of time… Fortunately I had parents who enabled, or at least allowed, a fair chunk of my play…' (Paul 2018, p. 1).

Bourdieu's concepts have sometimes been used in games studies: Consalvo (2025) talks about 'gaming capital' and Joshua Foust (2024) discusses a misogynist *habitus* in the video game industry. While interesting, these usages water down Bourdieu's sociology which examines how people from different class backgrounds participate differently in fields. This working paper will treat video games as a field and offer some working hypotheses about how this field is structured. One of the difficulties of applying Bourdieu's sociology to the field of video games is that data on social class is hard to obtain. Christopher Paul in his discussion of video gaming and symbolic violence does mention social class (Paul, 2018, pp. 55, 80, 90) but does not offer a sustained analysis. Much of his discussion of the 'meritocracy' of video games discusses issues of gender and race. These kinds of symbolic violence are more visible and easier to document.

Ninety percent of players use a personal computer. A console version of *Rust* was recently released. This means that the literature on the digital divide (by income, occupation, wealth, race and age) is relevant to video games. In order to play *Rust* successfully you need a recent and powerful computer and good broadband access to the internet. iRisk talks about his problems with reliable broadband, living in Omaha, Nebraska. He is a professional streamer of *Rust* on Twitch and is purchasing his own home. However, he had to change his internet company to get reliable high-speed internet service. Some streamers list their computer specs (viewers who need to upgrade their computer find this information helpful) and this entails a substantial financial investment. One reason why *Rust* streamers do well is that some gamers do not have a computer that can handle the game and instead they mostly watch someone else playing on Twitch, or watch edited videos of game play on YouTube.

Full-scale studies of video games and social class are difficult to find. If you want to find someone's occupation and level of education (together these are the best measures) you mostly have to ask them. Race, gender, disability and other differences are often more visible for researchers on video games. Benjamin Engelstatter and Michael Ward (2022) rely on time-use surveys conducted by the Census Bureau in the United States. Respondents are interviewed by phone about their time-use for a 24 hour period. Engelstatter and Ward are mainly concerned to refute the stereotype of gamer as a white, teen boy living with his parents. They clearly show that video games are more mainstream. One of the limitations of the data is that any game activity is included and so the research cannot distinguish between serious and casual play (increasingly on a smartphone). However the raw data does show that gaming activity increases with family income up to $100K, when it drops off sharply. High school graduates spend the most time gaming and the activity drops off as education increases (some college, college degree, graduate education).

The best study is Williams et al. (2008), based on a survey and other data on 7,000 players of *EverQuest*. This work was made possible by an unusual level of co-operation from Sony Online Entertainment which provided access to data from back-end databases and helped the researcher conduct a large survey. Players were offered a special virtual item added to their game inventory for completing a 25-minute survey. This offer was enthusiastically taken up by players logging into the game. The findings about *EverQuest* gamers include: average age is thirty-one, eighty percent are male, there are some differences by race (minorities play at lower rates), players have higher than average incomes and are more educated than the general population. Few children play the game. Players of *EverQuest* are physically healthier than nongamers. The conclusion

supports Bourdieu's method in *Distinction.* Playing a game such as *EverQuest* is associated with quite high levels of economic and cultural capital, though elites (over $100K income, graduate degree) tend not to play the game.

The data presented by Williams et al. in part supports Christopher Paul's argument about gaming meritocracy. Players value levelling up, acquiring items, figuring out the game mechanics and optimizing their character. However competing against other players is less valued. Getting to know other players and becoming friends are valued. But customizing their character to make them stylish and unique is less important. Escaping from the real world and leaving behind real-life problems, usually assumed to be important factors, are not the main motivations for playing *EverQuest* (Williams et al., 1018).

Video Game as Field

The landing page for *Rust* streamers on Twitch is an example of what Bourdieu means by a field. These eighteen streamers on Twitch participate in relation to each other (and others not shown in this screenshot). They are competing, but this does not exclude friendships and mutual aid. Some preliminary observations are that most in this array are streaming in English, even though many are not from English-speaking countries. We may also notice that two of the eighteen streamers are women and that none of these streams has an LBGT tag. Further analysis is needed to describe in detail how the field works. The only way we can discover the social class background of these streamers is to ask them (though they sometimes drop hints while streaming).

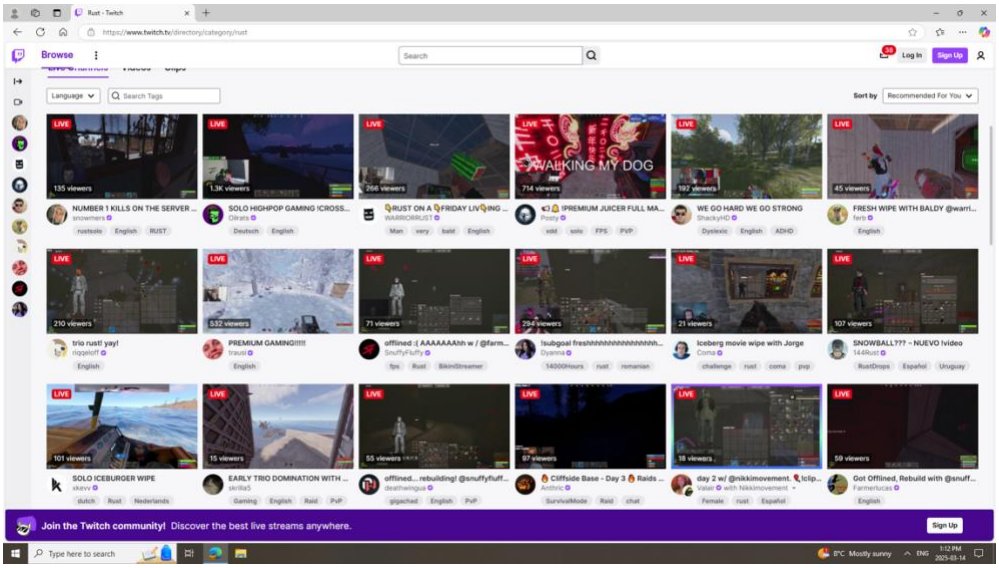

Figure 3: The field of *Rust* streamers on Twitch

We could could express relations in this field in other ways. Table 2 presents some data about four *Rust* streamers. This includes number of viewers on Twitch at this time, number of paid subs on Twitch, number of videos uploaded to YouTube and subscribers on YouTube. Right now there are 21.7K people watching *Rust* on Twitch. With 15 viewers you are in the top 90% of Rust streamers.

Table 3: Relation between four Rust streamers in the field

	Twitch viewers	subs	YT videos	YT subscribers
Templetaps (Canada)	89	4128	10	33.5K
iRisk (USA)	459	1218	379	206K
Sleth (Argentina)	82	1146	430	109K
Raynbirds (England)	30	565	366	1.6K

Source: Twitch and YouTube, Jan 2, 2025.

The person with the most viewers on Twitch is iRisk. Twitch subs are a source of income and Templetaps has the most subs. Many Twitch streamers also upload edited videos of game play to YouTube, but this seems less important for Templetaps. iRisk also leads in the number of YouTube subscribers to his channel, a sign that he has been producing content for almost ten years. By comparison, Raynbirds is a relatively new streamer.

All seem to be in their mid-twenties. All have a lot of hours in *Rust* and play the game at a high level. As streamers they put a lot of energy into interacting with chat (the source of much of their income). They are entertaining to watch. All stream in English.[2] They dress informally in t-shirts (the few women who stream *Rust* dress carefully and wear make-up). Each has a style of play. iRisk is meticulous about base design. He is ruthless in PvP combat. Sleth likes to grow hemp and today has a fish farm in the swamp. He often tries to be friendly to other players. They have different personalities. Raynbirds is thoughtful, he doesn't shout. Templetaps is the opposite. He keep up a high-energy pitch, a kind of hustle. None talks much about social and political issues (Powell & Williams-Johnson, 2023). Templetaps last night seemed to look forward to a new Canadian government and a period of business opportunity. Sleth seems to blame problems in Argentina on decades of 'socialist' governments. iRisk sometimes uses storage boxes with the logo Love Anyway and garage doors with the logo of World Central Kitchen. Raynbirds expresses support for LGBT and mental health issues. To explore these issues we would probably need to interview these four people.

The *Habitus* of *Rust* Streamers

In Bourdieu's sociology, the *habitus* refers to the lifeworld and it is always influenced by social class. The family informally passes on a *habitus* to children, and the education system usually

[2] For streamers in Argentina, Brazil, Poland, Romania, Lithuania, Estonia, the ability to speak fluent English is normally an indicator of high cultural capital. At TwitchCon 2017 it was reported that peak viewing on Twitch is between 3pm and 5pm EST. The majority of viewers are from the United States.

reinforces this. Disadvantaged children in the USA receive about $8,000 in education each year (Markovits, 2019). The figure for privileged children in private schools is ten time that amount. Although Bourdieu describes a social class habitus, he stresses that this is lived out in gender, race, urban-rural divides and other factors in systemic inequality. In order to explore the habitus of a player of *Rust* it is usually necessary to interview them. But many streamers give clues in chat.

Table 4: Socioeconomic status of Rust Streamers

Cuda:	Full-time streamer. Previously worked in family business doing office work. Almost completed degree in psychology. Mid-twenties and married. About to purchase a starter home. Twitch subs in 2017: 772.
Satavej:	Bosnia. Streams in English. Previously worked as a waiter earning $300 a month. Sold his car to purchase a PC and stream full time. Internet service costs him $50 a month. Rent where he lives is $100 to $150 a month. Often has 200 viewers on Twitch (with some initial help from Trausi, Shacky and other streamers). He is supported by viewers' donations until he becomes a Twitch Partner in 2017. Soon has 200 subs. If he plays with Shacky there is a time difference. Sometimes it is 3am in Bosnia. After a year of streaming he is burned out from playing *Rust*. Age 32.
SippyTango	Lives in Austin TX. Previously worked in quality assessment at $9.30 an hour (half the going rate) testing casino video game slot machines. Would like to work for Facepunch. Twitch Partner in 2017. Age: mid-to-late twenties.
Shacky	Lives in Florida. Home schooled with his siblings. Went to college but dropped out because there was no accommodation for his dyslexia. But supports the idea of going to college. Father private detective. Mother operates a video rental store. Full time streamer. Often #1 *Rust* streamer on Twitch with over 1K viewers, and 900 subs. Computer cost $2,400 to build. Age 20.
Bragoon	University student. Major in Computer Science. Streaming part time while in school. Short of cash because of tuition. Age 24.
Rev	RevDoesTwitchStuff. From New Orleans. Attended private military school. Previously played League. University student at Baton Rouge with scholarship that pays part tuition. Doing well and applying to medical school. Wants to be a surgeon. Might take a year off and stream full time. Problems with slow home internet. Unable to stream in Summer 2017 and is headed to medical school. Age 20.
Scudpunk	Popular *Rust* streamer with almost a thousand subs on Twitch. Had to stop streaming because of Crohn's disease. SippyTango organized a benefit on Twitch that raised over $5,000 for his medical expenses. Returned to occasionally streaming in Fall 2017. Age 26.

Ghost	GhostPowderZ. Dutch but streams in English which he learned from video games and movies. Works in a metal shop, with night and day shifts alternating weekly. Nine viewers on Twitch. Age 21.
CoconutB	NYC college kid. Studying psychology. His mother expects him to go to college. Korean American. Often streams with no face camera. Lives in Queens. Also interested in martial arts. Previously played on a competitive Minecraft server. Sometimes causes controversy. Age 18, almost 19.
Frost	TheRealFrost. California. Often streams without a face camera. Setting up his stream was stressful though he quickly has over 300 viewers on Twitch. His parents do not seem supportive about streaming. "Streaming while trying to get through shit college." General education in Junior College. Previously played Minecraft. Got sub button in April 2017. Age 18.
Kira	Brazil. Streams in English with no face camera. I believe he is in college which is why he does not have a regular streaming schedule.
Bumbo	Florida. High school graduate. Small town. Internet service is not good. Some issues with his father. Recent full time streamer / YouTube creator. Age 20.
Antiflip	New Jersey. Served five years in US Marines. Mentions being in Afghanistan. It aged him physically and mentally but he is often quite funny. Going to college for business management. 20-40 viewers. Also plays other games.
SuspectLive	Grew up in Brazil but lives in USA. Goes to college. Has interview for computer job. Confident he did well. Almost went to University California at Riverdale but the fees are expensive ($15,000). He worked as a server since he was 14. Saved his money and went back to school to study computer science. Age 26.
Steel Rust Vanilla	Sometimes plays with KCmo (a popular YouTube creator). College computer science major. Wants a job, maybe stream for a living. Used to participate in jujitsu. Engaged to be married. Age 26.
Trausi	Poland. Stream in English with heavy accent. Excellent PvP skills in game. Sometimes has 600 viewers on Twitch. Age 26.
iRiskPvP	Nebraska. Some college but didn't like it. First appears in early 2017 and quickly becomes popular streamer. Spends $1,000 on equipment for streaming. Expensive for him. Sometimes plays other games but has most success streaming *Rust*. Also makes videos for YouTube. Age 20.
DyannaTV	Romania. Streams in English. Becomes the best-known woman streamer of *Rust*. I first notice her playing with Trausi.

Hutnik1	Poland. Streams in English. Training to be a chef. I first notice him playing with Trausi.
Jim_Bob	Jimm_Bobb. Quebec, Canada. In English. Often streams with Shacky. Quit his day job to stream full time. No face camera. Age 17.
Highlight-	Grew up near Cleveland Ohio. No television or video games. Average white Riehl middle-class parents. Recent college grad in Aerospace Engineering with a 9-5 job in Los Angeles. Streams in evening and in week-ends. His computer cost $1,400. Previously played League of Legends. Age 24.
hJune	Canadian-Korean. Vancouver. Streams with no face camera. I first saw him playing with Trausi. Used to play Minecraft. At university. Age 20.
Ray_c	California. University student doing biology. Hopes to enter medical field. Age 19.
Stain	South Carolina. Originally from Scotland. Retired military. Posts thoughtful comments about the game. 40 viewers on Twitch. Age 43.
Picco	Plays with CoconutB. Full-time college student with part-time job. Streams when he can.

Source: Research notes from 2016-2107.

Streamers are listed in the order in which they first appear in research notes. Some of these streamers play together and have also received substantial donations from Rustin Timberlake, who apparently has a well-paying job and likes to support *Rust* streamers. Age 30.

The data set shows that successful streamers have fairly high levels of cultural capital from their families. Many have at least some college or are university students. Ghost is a working-class gamer from Europe but he quickly disappears. Bumbo comes from a working-class background in the Florida and has some success. There is competition and sometimes drama between these streamers. But also quite an amount of mutual aid. Trausi goes out of his way to help new European streamers.[3] The community organized a benefit for a popular streamer who was very sick. Rustin who is not a streamer but plays *Rust* donated substantial sums (sometimes over $10,000) to help new streamers get established. At the same time there is constant complaint about *Rust* as a game. It is unbalanced. Servers lag. It is too easy to cheat. There is too much toxic behaviour, including racist and homophobic slurs. The game needs active administrators but they are lacking on many servers. There is a lot of making fun of the game developers: next week they will introduce sunglasses to counter the sun glare that they introduced this week. In

[3] In terms of Christopher Paul s argument about meritocracy, one of the most PvP oriented players in *Rust* (Trausi) is also one of the most generous in helping new streamers, especially those in Europe.

2017 many streamers predicted the game would die. Changes made by *Rust* developers often seem to make the game easier for new players and keep purchases of the game from collapsing. There are several named developers and each seems to take the game in a different direction. One dev is criticized as a role player. Another wants more PvP. Developers should play the game more. Regular streamers have a better sense of the game (what needs to be fixed) because they play it for long hours.

Conclusion

I have called this a working paper because there is much to be done. An ideal research program would enlist the co-operation of Facepunch Studios to perform a large-scale survey of *Rust* players. A similar research project found that players will respond, especially if there is a reward such as a unique in-game skin. A full research program would also require interviews with those who stream *Rust* on Twitter. These interviews could be done on Discord or by video link. It would be ideal to also interview the principals and employees at Facepunch Studios. But in this preliminary paper I hope to have demonstrated how this research would be done, and to have demonstrated the usefulness of Bourdieu's approach: to study video games as a field to which participants bring everything from their *habitus*. The working hypothesis of such research is that video games are not a subculture, not a world apart. Successful players and streamers bring their cultural capital to the enterprise. They are mostly middle-class kids and mostly in the category of some college. They come from families that expected them to go to college, but video games turned out to be more interesting.

References

Author (2008).
Author (2024).
Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.* Harvard University Press.
Bourdieu, P. (2018). *Classification Struggles*. Polity Press.
Bourdieu, P. (2020). *Habitus and Field*. Polity Press.
Castronova, E. (2005). *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games.* University of Chicago Press,
Consalvo, M. (2007). *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames.* MIT Press.
Consalvo, M., Lajeunesse, M. & Zanescu, A. (2025). *Streaming by the Rest of Us: Microstreaming in Twitch.* MIT Press.
DeVane, B. & Squire, K. D. (2008). The Meaning of Race and Violence in Grand Theft Auto. *Games and Culture*, 3(3-4), 264-285.
Dyer-Witheford, N. & de Peuter G. (2009). *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games.* University of Minnesota Press.
Engelstatter B. & Ward, M. (2022). Video games become more mainstream. *Entertainment Computing* 42, online.
Facepunch Studios (2018). *Rust.* Video game.
Foust, J. (2024). The habitus of misogyny: Bourdieu and the institutionalization of sexist abuse in the video games industry. *Media, Culture & Society* 46(4), 762-776.

Hollingsworth S., Mansaray, A., Allen, K. & Rose, A. (2011). Parents' perspectives on technology and children's learning in the home: social class and the role of the habitus. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning,* 27, 347-360.
Houssard, A., Pilati, F., Tartari, M., Sacco, P. L. & Gallotti, R. (2023). Monetization in online streaming platforms: an exploration of inequities in Twitch.tv. *Scientific Reports* 13. Online.
Jensen, K. H, Fynbo, L. & Hansen, N. N. (2025). The interplay between game design and social practice. *New Media & Society* 27(2), 1014-1033.
Johnson, M. R. & Woodcock, J. (2019a). "And Today's Top Donator is": How Live Streamers on Twitch.tv Monetize and Gamify Their Broadcasts. *Social Media & Society,* online.
Johnson, M. R. & Woodcock, J. (2019b). The impacts of live streaming and Twitch .tv on the video game industry. *Media, Culture & Society* 41(5), 670-688.
Jorgensen, K. & Karlsen, F. (Eds.) (2018). *Transgression in Games and Play.* MIT Press.
Markovits, D. (2019). *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite.* Penguin Press.
Martinelli, D. (2017). Skin Gambling: Have We Found The Millennial Goldmine Or Imminent Trouble? *Gaming Law Review* 21(8), 557-565.
Mirowski, A. & Castronova, E. (2020). Skin Out of the Game: Virtual Gambling in Novel Spaces. In Ghosh, B. & Sarkar, B. (eds.) The *Routledge Companion to Media and Risk* (online) Routledge.
Newman, G. (2016, April 13). Why my video game chooses your character's race and gender for you. *The Guardian*, online.
Partin, W. C. (2020). Bit by (Twitch) Bit: "Platform Capture" and the Evolution of digital Platforms. *Social Media & Society,* online.
Paul, C. A. (2018). *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture is the Worst.* University of Minnesota Press.
Powell, A. & Williams-Johnson (2023). "You dumb cracker b*tch": The legitimizing of White supremacy during a Twitch ban of HasanAbi. *New Media & Society*, online.
Robinson, L. (2009). A Taste for the Necessary: A Bourdieuian approach to digital inequality. *Information, Communication & Society,* 12(4), 488-507.
Sims, C. (2014). Video Game Culture, Contentious Masculinities, and Reproducing Racialized Social Class Divisions in Middle School. *Signs: Journal of women in Culture and Society*, 39(4), 848-857.
Sjoblom, M., Torhonen, M., Hamari, J. & Macey, J. (2018). The ingredients of Twitch streaming: Affordances of game streams. *Computers in Human Behavior* 92, 20-28.
Small, Z. (2024, Dec 26). Video Games Can't Afford To Look This Good. *New York Times,* online.
Taylor, T. L. (2018). Twitch and the Work of Play. *American Journal of Play,* 11(1), 65-84.
Thorhauge, A. M. (2024). The steam platform economy: From retail to player-driven economies. *New Media and Society*, 26(4), 1963-1983.
van Dijk, J. A. G. M (2005). *The Deepening Divide: Inequality in the Information Society.* SAGE.
van Dreunen, J. (2010). Social gaming and discursive play: Video games as communicative exchange. Doctoral Dissertation, Columbia University.
Vilasis-Pamos, J. & Perez-Latorre, O. (2022). Gamer Identity and Social Class: An Analysis of Barcelona Teenagers' Discourses on Videogame Culture and Gaming Practices. *International Journal of communication,* 16, 5864-5884.

Watkins, C. S., Lombana-Bermudez, A., Cho, A., Ryan Vickery, J. Shaw V. & Weinzimmer, L. (2018). *The Digital Edge: How Black and Latino Youth Navigate digital Inequality.* New York University Press.

Williams, D, Yee, N. & Caplan, S. E. (2008). Who plays, how much, and why? Debunking the stereotypical gamer profile. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13, 993-1018.