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Onlife intersectionalities as flows of playbour: The case of women in gaming

Introduction

What happens online, does not stay online. Rather, online experiences are shaped by and give shape to offline sociomaterialities, just as offline events can have deep online repercussions. As delineations of online and offline realities are destabilized, digital capitalism troubles classical notions of contextual singularity and agential unity to, instead, offer networked opportunities for (inter)action (Beverungen et al., 2019; Fourcade and Healy, 2013; Just, 2019). Floridi (2015: 1) coins the concept of ‘onlife’ for this “new experience of a hypermediated reality.”

The onlife integration of hitherto separate spheres also involves socioeconomic entanglements of users’ self-expression and technological corporations’ profiteering. Seeking to conceptualize such dynamics of empowerment and exploitation, we introduce the notion of *onlife intersectionalities*. Where the concept of intersectionality usually refers to the enactment of identities at the crossroad of different dimensions like gender, race, sexuality, class, etc. (Crenshaw, 1989; Holvino, 2010), we add the intersection of personal and commercial interests. Onlife, we suggest, intersectionalities are enacted as flows of *playbour*, producing social and economic value through playful activity (Goggin, 2011; Kücklich, 2005). Seeking to illustrate these conceptual relations empirically, we turn to the case of online gaming. As the intertwined processes of professionalizing e-sports and capitalizing game (live) streaming are reconfiguring the gaming industry (Taylor, 2012, 2018), studying individual gamers’ playbour may illuminate the workings of onlife intersectionalities.

Gaming is arguably an extreme case of how onlife intersectionalities of *gendered prosumption* unfold in flows of playbour. In terms of prosumption, the combined act of producing and consuming a good or service (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), gaming is among the first ‘digitally

native' industries, capitalizing on the convergence of leisure and work (Abend et al., 2019; Dyer-Witford and de Peuter, 2009). Gamers not only pay to play their game(s) of choice, but also provide marketing opportunities for game developers (and other companies) by, for instance, live streaming their gameplay or tweeting about their gaming experiences (Johnson and Woodcock, 2019). While gamers may profit from such activities, game developers benefit doubly from consumers' co-productive engagement with their products. As such, online gaming provides a technological blueprint for subsequent forms of digital organizing, from social media networks to virtual reality collaborations, that destabilize the boundaries of working and playing (Fuchs, 2014; Wood et al., 2019).

Regarding gender, research has shown that video games reproduce gender stereotypes and that the social context of gaming is not only marked by homophily (Williams, 2010), but, indeed, favours the normative and normalized subject position of the white, cis, straight, male gamer (Dickerman et al., 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2017; Thornham, 2008). Despite the recent push towards increased representation of diverse subjects in-game (Malkowski and Russworm, 2017) and the concomitant upsurge in queer and other minoritized gaming experiences (Ruberg, 2018; Sundén, 2012), the normative identity of the gamer, as constructed on exclusionary terms, remains dominant (Chess and Shaw, 2015; Massanari, 2017). Thus, heightened minority representation cannot in and of itself ameliorate the deeper and more pervasive structural inequalities and cultural biases of gaming (Shaw, 2012).

In the present study, we zoom in on the individual experiences of three professional women gamers and detail how their onlife intersectionalities interrelate with their flows of playbour. Thus, we ask, *how do women gamers negotiate their onlife intersectionalities as they play out in (and on) the process of making a living from gaming?* To explore this question, we first review the extant literature, then present our methods and analysis. Following the empirical study, we consider its

conceptual implications, discussing what the case of women in gaming may tell us about onlife experiences in and of digital capitalism.

Empirically, our study is too small to be anything but illustrative; however, it does indicate that the playbour of professional women gamers unfolds on a continuum between the two established ideal types of ‘the streamer’ and ‘the e-athlete’ and that individual positions on that continuum are significantly shaped by the intersections of gender, race, and class. Based on these preliminary and tentative findings, our main contribution is the introduction of the conceptual framework of onlife intersectionalities. This framework combines existing theories of increasing integration between online-offline experiences, on the one hand, and leisure and labour, on the other, inviting further investigation of how onlife intersectionalities unfold as flows of playbour, in gaming and beyond.

The digital labour of women in gaming

The internet has become a pervasive infrastructure for human activity and interaction, constituting a new economic and societal order (Kenney and Zysman, 2016; van Dijk et al., 2018): digital capitalism. Beginning from a broad definition of digital capitalism as “the collection of processes, sites, and moments in which digital technology mediates the structural tendencies of capitalism” (Pace, 2018: 262), we home in on the concept of digital labour as a constitutive force for onlife intersectionalities.

In what follows, we first establish that digital labour transforms *and* reproduces gendered patterns of paid vs free work. Second, we ask how interrelations of play and work condition the onlife experiences of women in gaming. In doing so, we posit the gaming industry as an extreme case of exploitation-cum-empowerment of gendered subjects under digital capitalism.

Gendered digital labour – getting paid to play vs working for free

Digital labour, broadly speaking, denotes any value productive activity that is performed online or based on a digital platform, from formal jobs (e.g., customer service) through gigs (e.g., food delivery) and ‘passions-turned-work’ (e.g., influencer marketing) to the ‘free labour’ users perform in the service of platforms (e.g., posting and moderating on social media) (Beverungen et al., 2015; Bucher et al., 2019; Gregg and Andrijasevic, 2019; Scholz, 2013). As such, digital labour presents new opportunities for empowerment *and* reproduces old patterns of exploitation, especially at the (blurred) boundary between play and work.

Kücklich (2005) coins the concept of ‘playbour’ for activities that span this boundary. Focusing on the free labour that gamers contribute to game development by modifying existing games, Kücklich understands playbour as a precarious activity, the unpaid labour that gamers perform as an extension of their play. Widening this initial definition, the concept has travelled from the work of gaming to also encompass the gamification of work (Cherry, 2011; Vasudevan and Chan, 2022) as well as the professionalization (or, perhaps more precisely, ‘sportification’, see Pargman and Svensson, 2019) of gaming, with its allure of turning one’s favourite pastime into a prosperous career (Taylor, 2012). Across all these areas of applications, the concept highlights the precarity of the denoted activities; wherever playbour is involved, potential economic gain incurs heightened personal risk (Mejias, 2010).

The skewed dividends of digital playbour are exasperated by the reproduction of gendered inequalities in terms of who typically perform which forms of labour and who are paid for doing so. Just as domestic work and other types of reproductive labour that remain stereotypically encoded as ‘feminine’ were not remunerated during industrial capitalism, so the new unpaid ‘support functions’ of digital capitalism are overwhelmingly performed by women (Huws, 2019; Jarrett, 2016). Further, women are often tasked with ‘emotion management’ on top of their direct digital tasks and

(inter)actions (Arcy, 2016). For example, when women gamers stream their gameplay, they must deal with audiences' reactions to their gender as well as their game (Ruberg and Cullen, 2019). In sum, women tend to work for free in support of their own and others' paid play.

Onlife experiences of women in gaming

While the study of gendered dimensions of digital labour has been established as a research agenda, the consequences of women's digital labour merit further attention (Lai, 2021). Specifically, we need more knowledge of how experiences of gendered digital labour interact with other experiences of the subjects performing such work. Digital labour is virtual *and* real; meaning, its online enactments and offline consequences should be studied relationally rather than dialectically (Woods, 2021). Here, the notion of 'onlife' experiences, defined broadly as the products and performances of hypermediated reality (Floridi, 2015: 1), foregrounds how ubiquitous online-offline integration enhances the potential of digital labour to traverse traditional distinctions and categories of human experience.

To understand these dynamics further, we introduce the framework of onlife intersectionalities. Widening the usual understanding of intersectionality to include not only the intersection of identity dimensions but also the exploitative-and-empowering effects that (emotional/commercial) digital labour has on involved subjects (Elerding and Risam, 2018), we become able to explore how onlife experiences are both free from inhibiting social constraints and bring such constraints back, often with a vengeance. Digital technologies may enable individuals to construct their identities more freely, designing their online personas whichever way they want, but demands of authenticity hold people accountable to their own constructs (Andreassen, 2021; Haimson and Hoffman, 2016). Further, online personas do not stay online, and people experience tremendous pressure to be 'always on', 'always available', and 'always in character' (Gregg, 2011).

Thus, ‘freely chosen’ online identities may become as much of an inhibition as ‘given’ offline identities and are subject to (at least) as much emotional labour and social control (Drenten et al., 2020; Van Oort, 2018).

Focusing on the onlife intersectionalities of gaming, it is immediately clear that gendered patterns of prosumption are particularly pervasive, as the gaming industry constitutes an extreme case of the ‘collection of processes, sites, and moments’ that is digital capitalism. Gaming is the place of origin of playbour and the site from which gamification has spread to (other) areas of the economy. Gaming is fun, fast-paced, financialized – and it has serious issues concerning the precarity of the people working in the industry (Bulut, 2020) as well as with the (lack of) representation and (continued) marginalization of minority groups (Shaw, 2014). For women, this implies relegation to precarious positions, both within the industry of games development and in the growing field of e-sports (Prescott and Bogg, 2011; Taylor et al., 2009). Such continued marginalization may be counterintuitive, as, arguably, online gaming constitutes a particularly fertile arena for identity play, but gaming has also turned out to be a hotbed for the (re-)production of normative subject positions (Fantone, 2009; Liu and Lai, 2022). Thus, online gaming has continued the tendency of earlier video games to be very much constructed as boys’ play, and while the playground has grown immensely and become increasingly professionalized, the gendered parameters of gaming have not widened accordingly (Catá, 2019; Rogstad, 2021).

To understand how unequally distributed conditions of possibility of playbour relate to onlife intersectionalities, we now turn to the empirical study of women gamers. First, we present our methods, then the analysis. In the concluding discussion, we consider how our illustrative study may inspire further investigation of – and debate about – the interrelations between empowerment and exploitation under conditions of digital capitalism.

Methods

Methodologically, the study is inspired by feminist technology studies (Bauchspies and de la Bellacasa, 2009; Wajcman, 2000), with their broad normative concern for issues of representation and equality as well as a more specific sensitivity to the ways in which gendered identities are co-constituted with other identity dimensions (Losh and Wermimont, 2018; Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 2008). We supplement the actor-centric approach of detailing individual intersectionalities with a processual orientation (Baygi et al., 2021), focusing on the way onlife intersectionalities play out as flows of playbour.

Thus, our analysis is centred on the experiences of individual women gamers, paying attention to how those experiences are shaped by the specific intersectionalities of each individual as well as by the broader commercial flows in which they take part and detailing the distributions of efforts and rewards. Before turning to this two-fold analysis, we present our methods of data collection and analysis.

Meet the gamers

Beginning from the ideal types of e-sports professional and full-time streamer (Taylor, 2012, 2018), we contacted close to 100 women gamers who were selected based on their self-portrayals in their biographies on social media. Searching for participants and scrutinizing their respective profiles for ways to get in contact, we noticed a strong tendency for these gamers to brand themselves – they presented themselves not just as gamers or *woman* gamers. Instead, all of them emphasized further aspects and/or identity dimensions, be that their educational backgrounds, their personalities or aesthetics, in order to establish their uniqueness and likeability (see also, Zolides, 2015).

Based on our initial invitations, we were able to secure the participation of three women whose experiences we have detailed here because their flows of playbour were openly and visibly

shaped by very different intersections between gender, race, and class. Following Crenshaw (1989), we focus on these intersections to understand these gamers not just as ‘women’, but as women with situationally differing privileges and access to varying resources, which were contingent on the colour of their skin and their economic background – and, surely, on a host of other less prominent but equally important features, which we were unable to uncover fully in this study. That is, we could have sought out other, less visible obvious intersections but decided to focus on those that the gamers were willing to self-disclose online.

While the small sample size only allows us to provide an illustrative account of onlife playbour, it has the advantage of enabling us to work ethically and with the full consent of our participants, detailing a sensitive topic with a group of vulnerable respondents (how earning money online is tied up with intersecting personal identity markers that constitute minority positions). With each of the three gamers, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured online interviews, which were supplemented by observations of their well-chronicled online presences. This entailed closely following updates as well as considering the rich histories of their accounts on Twitch and other (social) media as well as searching for mentions of them on other (digital) platforms, which yielded countless hours of streamed videos, interactions in chat boxes and comment sections, sponsored as well as ‘personal’ posts in addition to numerous reports on and interviews with the gamers, generated by third parties. Treating all of this material as secondary data, it aided us in crafting our interview template and provided guidance for the analysis, which, however, is mostly based on the primary data of the interviews. Importantly, identifying recurrent themes (such as calls to subscribers to support ‘their’ gamer across platforms or repeated mentions of certain games, products, and discount codes) in these secondary materials helped us to trace the flows of playbour across different online platforms, enabling us to ask more specific questions in the interviews – and to verify information from the interviews in online interactions.

The analysis, then, draws on interviews and online material to establish ‘thick descriptions’ of each gamer, which we present in the format of vignettes and unfold in two rounds of analysis, one diachronic and the other synchronic. The vignettes draw from the different data sources in order to enhance the validity of the presented accounts. In line with our promise to protect the participants’ identities, we only refer to them by their anonymized aliases, which we created using an automatic and randomized gamer name generator, just as we remain vague about the details of the game(s) they play and other facts that might identify them. This enhances the conceptual relevance of our analysis; while drawn from specific experiences, it tells stories of broader purport.

In the first round of analysis, we build chronological accounts of how the three women reached their current positions of professional gamers/streamers, noting how these journeys were shaped by each woman’s class and race. In the second round, we focus on how the gamers make their living, building maps of the flows of leisure and labour (i.e., playbour) that constitute their current positions. Understanding these flows in relation to the gamers’ onlife intersectionalities (that is, combining the two rounds of analysis) is the starting point for our concluding discussion. Here, we will explicate how the empirical study is illustrative of our conceptual framework and consider the empirical and theoretical contributions to the critique of digital labour/capitalism that emerge from studying onlife intersectionalities as flows of playbour.

Analysis, part 1: Onlife intersectionalities

In this section, we present the stories of three women who all make a living by playing video games. For all three, live-streaming gameplay on Twitch is central to their playbour, as it is (part of) what makes the play profitable. However, they use Twitch in different ways, interrelating this platform with various other sources of revenue, which we will detail in the second round of

analysis. In the first round, we introduce the three gamers' personal stories, focusing on the ways in which online intersectionalities of gender, race, and class have shaped their careers in gaming.

CaptainCute – Full-time streamer with 61k Twitch followers

CaptainCute is a 20-year-old white woman from a middle-class family in the US. She explains that computers have always been a part of her life, since her father has been building PCs for as long as she can remember. When she was six, he gave her a PC, which she used solely for gaming.

CaptainCute grew up admiring the influencers she could see in the media she consumed, her favourites being the YouTubers that make funny yet relatable content. Two years ago, bored and in the middle of the pandemic, she decided to start her own stream on Twitch. She explains that there was no intent other than “having fun”, thinking “it is not going to go anywhere anyways” but that she might as well stream while playing her favourite first-person shooter game.

CaptainCute started without a webcam, just the baseline equipment that she had available at home, and was immediately fascinated:

I streamed for 24 hours straight for absolutely no reason because I was having so much fun.

And then, honestly, just out of nowhere around like my four-month mark... it blew up insane. I don't know how, people just started coming in, it was crazy. And I was like, wow, this can actually be a genuine career for me.

The fascination expressed here is twofold: First, streaming is fun; it takes the pandemic boredom away and gives her the feeling that she is doing something with her time. Second, and for reasons that she cannot explain, the Twitch algorithm has begun directing viewers onto her page. Seemingly out of nowhere, CaptainCute has found herself with an audience; there are people, strangers, that like her personality, that talk with her, and cheer her on over the chat. To CaptainCute, this was – and continues to be – a very gratifying experience, as she no longer perceives herself as just a bored

late-teen in her parents' house but can reposition herself as someone who is a little bit famous on the internet. As she is growing into fame, her father has continued to offer support; he is, for instance, happy to buy a camera or a better microphone and expresses admiration for her endeavours, thus facilitating the material as well as emotional security necessary for her to devote herself fully to streaming.

Consequently, CaptainCute has adjusted her entire life around her new passion, streaming "every single day." Reflecting on her online experience, CaptainCute says that she is the most 'real' version of herself online. Offline, she is just a normal young woman, but online she can be boisterous, sassy; she can say whatever goes through her mind while she takes out her opponents with her assault rifle. Similarly, she thinks of her followers as a community: "You're not a viewer. You're a friend. If you need help, come to me, like, I will be there as a mentor or as a friend. Whatever you want me to be. I can be."

In sum, streaming is a relatively new occupation for CaptainCute, a pastime that has turned out to be profitable *and* emotionally rewarding. Here, age, class, and race intersect with gender, offering CaptainCute a position of seemingly effortless success. While she has played computer games since an early age and is good at them, her popularity with followers arguably has more to do with how she looks, how she (re-)acts, and what she says while streaming than with her in-game action. Surely, streaming depends on gaming, but it is the stream more than the game that makes people seek out and become devoted to CaptainCute.

Taurasaurus – E-athlete with 76k Twitch followers

Taurasaurus is a 25-year-old woman from Latin America. Her particular passion is a well-known and hugely successful sports videogame. When she first began playing, she merely enjoyed the

game, gradually growing more serious and competitive as she realized she had talent. Starting when she was 10 years old, she explains, she has been “improving and learning every day.”

As her hobby became more serious, Taurasaurus met financial obstacles. For instance, buying a PlayStation was a serious expense for her family, but it enabled her to play online and to upload videos to YouTube. This way, she gained more and more attention, increasing her number of followers – as well as the intensity of their support. And with the financial help of followers, she was eventually able to upgrade to a gaming computer, a camera, and a microphone. Now, people could see *and* hear her, which is important because it enabled Taurasaurus to show her personality – for example, celebrating when she makes a big win. With this technological setup, she began live streaming her gameplay on Twitch, reaching even more people and accessing a platform for making (more) money on her game (see the second round of analysis).

The gradual improvements in her gaming setup, the professionalization of her presence online, and her continuous efforts to advance her gameplay kept drawing more and more attention, leading Taurasaurus towards a professional e-sports career. In 2019, a sub-section of a large e-sports organization reached out to her with an offer to sign her on as a full-time player. This offer coincided with a job opening in an import-export company, a workplace where Taurasaurus could have used her vocational training:

I didn't really know how the gaming world worked, but I was very happy, because it was the recognition of a job that I had been doing for a while. Today, I can say that I made the right choice.

Despite the uncertainties, she chose to become a professional e-athlete and has been rewarded for her choice.

As an e-athlete who continues to have a streaming presence, Taurasaurus relates that she frequently encounters sexism and misogyny. But she refuses to be discouraged, highlighting her in-

game achievements as the best answer to her critics. The game she plays is one-on-one; meaning, her successes (and failures) are entirely her own. Although she is not comfortable speaking in English, her playstyle and her wins speak for themselves.

Taurasaurus has faced difficulties on the path towards her current position, mostly due to her family's strained economic situation, which meant equipment was not always readily available. And she still faces challenges as a woman in a male-dominated context but has also gained followers and increased popularity through her professional and athletic approach to her game of choice. As such, Taurasaurus' life story as well as her current online persona closely resemble those of many of the players of the sport that she plays the videogame version of.

TechLegsOMG – Online personality with 18,5k Twitch followers

TechLegsOMG is a woman of colour in her late 20s from the US. She is very private with her personal information and takes care not to disclose too many details that could help people find her offline – both in her online interactions and in the interview with us. TechLegsOMG came to streaming quite late. She graduated from university with a degree in computer science and had started a prestigious job in the tech industry, working with illustrious corporate clients and trying to gather enough expertise to establish herself in a career of consultancy. Then, however, she got married to the man with whom she had maintained a long-term, long-distance relationship. Wanting to be with her husband and knowing that he would be able to support her, she quit her job and moved across the country.

TechLegsOMG's decision to begin streaming came out of this new situation: "Sitting at home by myself, working on my personal projects, getting ready for the next Star Trek convention... I just wanted to talk to people, but I didn't know anybody." Out of boredom and looking for people to connect with over "nerdy stuff," she started streaming on YouTube and

Twitch. She already had the equipment, as building gaming PCs and learning about the various specs of different components had been her passion since childhood. So, she started sharing some of her computer science projects, explaining how different equipment is made and doing walk-throughs of the code she writes. She also shared gameplay, preferring to play different games and trying out various styles while commenting on how they perform in relation to the computer hardware she uses. Slowly, people began following her.

The views, however, remained relatively few, her community being loyal but not growing very quickly. Looking for more opportunities to connect with a larger audience, TechLegsOMG branched out, starting to accept gigs outside of her own Twitch channel and, for example, hosting events where others play while she offers commentary and interviews players. The firms that hire her for such gigs are often quite explicit in their praise of not only her qualifications and reliability, but also the much-needed diversity she brings into gaming, if only on the side-lines.

Hosting gigs has extended her popularity and enabled her followership to keep growing. To cater to followers, TechLegsOMG carefully performs what she calls “online personality work,” where she markets herself as the quirky, nerdy Black woman computer scientist who likes cosplay and plays Dungeons & Dragons. She may not always excel at the different games she plays, but she always ads to her audience’s experience with charisma, intellect, and an instantly likeable personality.

When asked if she can support herself with the income that she makes this way, she just laughs. Of course, she can, even though (or rather, because) streaming is no longer her single source of income: “This is so being online, is it? That is my job now ... So, I don’t necessarily do everything just on my stream, but streaming absolutely brought all of that to me.” In establishing herself within and beyond streaming, TechLegsOMG primarily navigates intersections of gender and race, having to constantly negotiate stereotyped expectations and potential backlashes, but her

particular position also holds much potential, not least in terms of economic gain, as we will see in the next round of analysis.

Analysis, part 2: Flows of playbour

All three women gamers can live off their online presence and have no offline job. These basic similarities aside, their situations are quite distinct from each other, as they generate their income – and spend it – in different ways, which we detail next.

CaptainCute – Making money for fun

CaptainCute makes 100% of her income from streaming on Twitch. While she also connects with her followers outside of that platform (for example, on Instagram, Twitter, and Discord), it is exclusively through Twitch that she receives money. To this end, she has achieved the status of Twitch Partner, meaning that she can offer her followers subscriptions at different tiers, where higher tiers are more expensive (hence, generating more revenue) and offer subscribers more access to the streamer as well as other benefits (e.g., use of exclusive emojis). These subscriptions can be bought for oneself or given as a gift, and if a certain number of subscriptions sell within a given timeframe, CaptainCute's channel will receive a boost and has a higher likelihood of being featured on Twitch's front page, hence attracting even more viewers.

CaptainCute also earns a share of the revenue coming from any advertisement that Twitch may place on her channel. In this context, she has an impact on both the length and frequency of the ads that will run. This must be negotiated, as followers often dislike such ads and do not understand why they are exposed to commercials when they have already subscribed. What followers do like, however, is how CaptainCute spends her money; namely, on skins for her in-game character (some

of which she will occasionally gift to followers) as well as on makeup, clothes, and other style-items for her streaming performances.

While CaptainCute now lives off her streaming income – and lives well – she maintains her initial attitude of just having fun and stumbling into fame and fortune. As we will discuss below, this attitude is very much a result of the privileges of CaptainCute’s onlife intersectionalities, which enable her to cash in on her play with what she presents as both very little and a lot of labour. On the one hand, it is little, because she is only live for a couple of hours each night. On the other hand, the preparations of her setup, cleaning up her room, putting on makeup, answering emails, managing the discussions on Discord, etc. are not to be ignored and constitute the unseen underbelly of her more visible – and visibly joyful – playbour.

Presenting this work as ‘a dream’ is very much in line with CaptainCute’s persona, but we may also see it as an expression of privilege; the privilege of not having to think about how big a cut Twitch takes of her income, not having to think about how her followers earn the money they spend on her, not having to think about how she herself will secure an income tomorrow...just being able to have fun while happening to make money.

Taurasaurus – Playing for real

Taurasaurus’ contract with the e-sports group entails a monthly salary with which she not only supports herself, but also provide her family with financial security. While this salary is considered standard in the context of professional gaming, it converts into a small fortune in in the context of her local community. The fact that Taurasaurus uses her income to support her family immediately puts her in a very different position from that of CaptainCute. Taurasaurus and her family are dependent on the income and thankful for the steady flow that is secured by the contract with the e-sports group.

The group, however, has its own agenda. They are marketing Taurasaurus as a discovery, a diamond in the rough, which adds value to their own brand. Further, the prize money from competitions goes to the group, not the individual gamer, and even mid-ranking efforts can earn enough money to pay the salaries of a team of e-athletes. In addition, Taurasaurus makes money for the group in the form of sponsorships, merchandising, and they can also charge public appearance fees for her.

When she is not training or competing, Taurasaurus streams on Twitch, where she too has Twitch Partner status. She still feels that this is fun but also there is a feeling of ‘owing’ it to her fanbase, given that their support was so essential for her success. She will go so far as to make sure to stream on important dates, such as her birthday or on Christmas, to ensure that her followers feel involved. But her success has also changed how she engages with followers: Taurasaurus’ gaming videos are now for paying subscribers only and she ensures that her archives on Twitch only contain games she played in the last two months.

In accounting for the flows of her playbour, it becomes clear that for Taurasaurus gender and class intersect differently with professional gaming than they do for CaptainCute; where CaptainCute is free to play, Taurasaurus depends on the income. Thus, the reliability of an employer is more attractive for Taurasaurus, whereas CaptainCute enjoys the freedom of self-employment on Twitch. For TechLegsOMG, as we shall see, the situation is somewhat more precarious but also holds more agential potential.

TechLegsOMG – Precariously empowered

TechLegsOMG is also a Twitch Partner, but she finds it difficult to get the support from Twitch that she needs to grow her followership. While she generates income from subscribers and donations, these monetary flows fluctuate too much for her liking. As mentioned, this is why she has moved

from exclusive presence on her own channel to also hosting different online events where she is building up a reputation as a capable and funny host.

In addition, TechLegsOMG pairs her gameplay with reviews for which she will accept sponsored products that she presents to and discusses with her community. Furthermore, she was recently picked up as a content creator by a large international e-sports group. However, TechLegsOMG is not a regular e-athlete, but part of a more laissez-faire group of gamers who are not necessarily brought in because they are 'good'. Rather, their particular appeal to the e-sports group is that audiences enjoy watching them.

Contrary to the other gamers, TechLegsOMG does not have one big and stable flow of income. Instead, she makes money in her different roles as streamer, e-athlete, host/commentator, and product reviewer; meaning, she is both freer to do what she likes the most and more precariously positioned – never fully dependent on one source of income and never entirely sure of what her next source of income will be. This position is somewhat alleviated by her offline private situation; while TechLegsOMG enjoys being financially independent from her husband, she is also freer to act as she pleases in her online relations, knowing that he (and the healthcare benefits he gets from his workplace) can cover her bills if necessary.

The issue of having support, emotionally as well as financially, is particularly important for TechLegsOMG, who often finds herself in situations of vulnerability, including the risk of being exploited by commissioning companies as well as the looming threat of emotional abuse by audiences. In her account of these situations, race is a recurrent theme, indicating how her onlife intersectionalities feature in the flows of playbour in which she is involved. To counter racially motivated abuse, TechLegsOMG relies on a group of likeminded (and -bodied) online friends, who not only lend each other emotional support, but also share insights on appropriate rates for various tasks and strategies for salary negotiation. Through such playful associations and caring relations

with other gamers, TechLegsOMG ensures that the relative freedom of her position does not come at too high a price.

Concluding discussion

Having accounted for the onlife experiences of three women gamers as these are shaped by, first, their individual intersectional identities and, second, their flows of playbour, we return to the conceptualization of ‘onlife intersectionalities’ as an explanatory *and* normative concept. The stories of the three gamers show how their onlife experiences (Floridi, 2015) mesh with and shape their intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1989) in flows of playbour (Kücklich, 2005). Detailing these entanglements of individual, organizational, and technological developments as they play out in three particular cases, we invite further thinking about how to establish and enact more inclusive and equitably flows of economic and emotional capital. As such, we move from a critique of the particular intersections between gender, race, and class towards an engagement with the broader conditions of possibility of digital labour – in the gaming industry and beyond. This leads to three contributions and invitations to future research:

First, we note the central position of big tech companies (notably, Amazon-owned Twitch, but also game developers and gaming platforms), which are at the centre of and key beneficiaries from all flows of playbour. Even if we have deliberately pushed them to the background of the preceding accounts, they continue to loom large – whatever else the women gamers are doing and whoever they are doing it for, they are also and inevitably making money for big tech. Thus, the account of how more diverse identity positions become available and profitable to individual gamers is also an account of how digital labour continues to serve traditional capitalist interests, as the extractive practices and imperialistic tendencies of big tech corporations not only extend across the globe but delve deeply into the private lives of individual ‘playbourers’.

When focusing on flows of playbour, the creative as well as the exploitative potential of digital capitalism is foregrounded. While existing studies rightly admonish us to be attentive to who profits off individuals' creative activity, our study indicates that individuals can find different ways of flourishing under the conditions of digital capitalism – that playbour can be as rewarding as it is exploitative. Future research may explore this potential further, adding the question of collective reform to that of personal reward. That is, does playbour constitute a viable tactic for enhancing individual and collective agency under conditions of digital capitalism? And what are the limitations of placing such hope in – and responsibility with – individuals?

Second, we recognize how the flows of playbour that we have identified are co-constructed with the different intersections of gender, race, and class, establishing different dependencies *and* opportunities for each gamer. Taurasaurus, the professional e-athlete, is most dependent on her income, but also in the most secure position. CaptainCute, the full-time streamer, is dependent on the algorithmic logics of Twitch, which she does not fully understand, but which seem to be particularly favourable to the intersections that constitute her identity position (cf. Drenten et al., 2020). Further, CaptainCute enjoys her family's support, meaning she would have other means of survival should Twitch's algorithms suddenly fail her. Finally, TechLegsOMG, the online personality, positions herself most precariously in between the two ideal types of the professional e-athlete and the full-time streamer (Taylor, 2012, 2018), adding further avenues of income to those offered by an e-sports group or available through Twitch by hosting events and doing influencer work. As such, this position may be the most insecure, but it is also the most independent.

Beyond identifying the flows of playbour, the analysis offers a novel link between the literature on digital labour and that of intersectional identity, enabling us to show how one relates to the other. Here, we have found that CaptainCute is primarily gendered in her performance of (young, white, middle-class) femininity and class plays an important role in Taurasaurus' pursuit of

her professional career whereas race comes to the fore in TechLegsOMG's dealings with the gaming industry and community. TechLegsOMG is never just a gamer or just a woman, but always encountered through the prefix of 'black', which shapes her personal interactions (of the three, it is evident that she receives by far the most hate in her online interactions) and her economic options (she is constantly undervalued and must enter tough negotiations to receive standard wages).

Hence, the study illuminates the ways in which onlife intersectionalities set different conditions for the enactment of playbour; what is, indeed, a game that happens to pay well for some, is hard work for others. And for those who are most dependent, increasing autonomy may also increase vulnerability – in terms of economic precarity as well as emotional risk. As our study only involves close encounters with three gamers, it may be illustrative of the usefulness of our framework, but it can, of course, not offer any sort of generalization. These are three accounts, no more no less, and we hope future research might test our framework in different contexts, detailing other onlife intersectionalities and, perhaps, offering so much substance as to begin recognizing patterns across them.

This takes us to our third and final point; namely, how the concept of onlife intersectionalities foregrounds the relationality of material *and* emotional online-offline entanglements. Who you are offline matters to who you can be and how you are received online, which will have implications on not only the emotional labour you will have to perform in order to claim your space, but also on your chances of being remunerated for the work you do. While new avenues of revenue are opening up, and all three gamers are making a living doing what they love, this is much more of a game for some than it is for others.

The concept of onlife intersectionalities helps us uncover and understand these different flows of playbour, indicating how the privilege of getting paid to play continues to be distributed unequally, even as it is extended beyond the traditional stereotype of the gamer. Accordingly, our

final invitation is for continued critique of these inequalities of digital labour, aiming to enhance individuals' ability to engage creatively and profitably in flows of playbour that support and nourish their various onlife intersectionalities. In particular, we suggest that beyond the stereotypical position of the (white, straight, male) gamer, which is currently privileged in playbour, a myriad of other positions are emerging, which further research – and practical interventions – might foreground, not only accounting for the richness of intersections and experiences that are intertwined with them but actively supporting more emotionally rewarding and economically lucrative onlife experiences.

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