Video Games and the Global South

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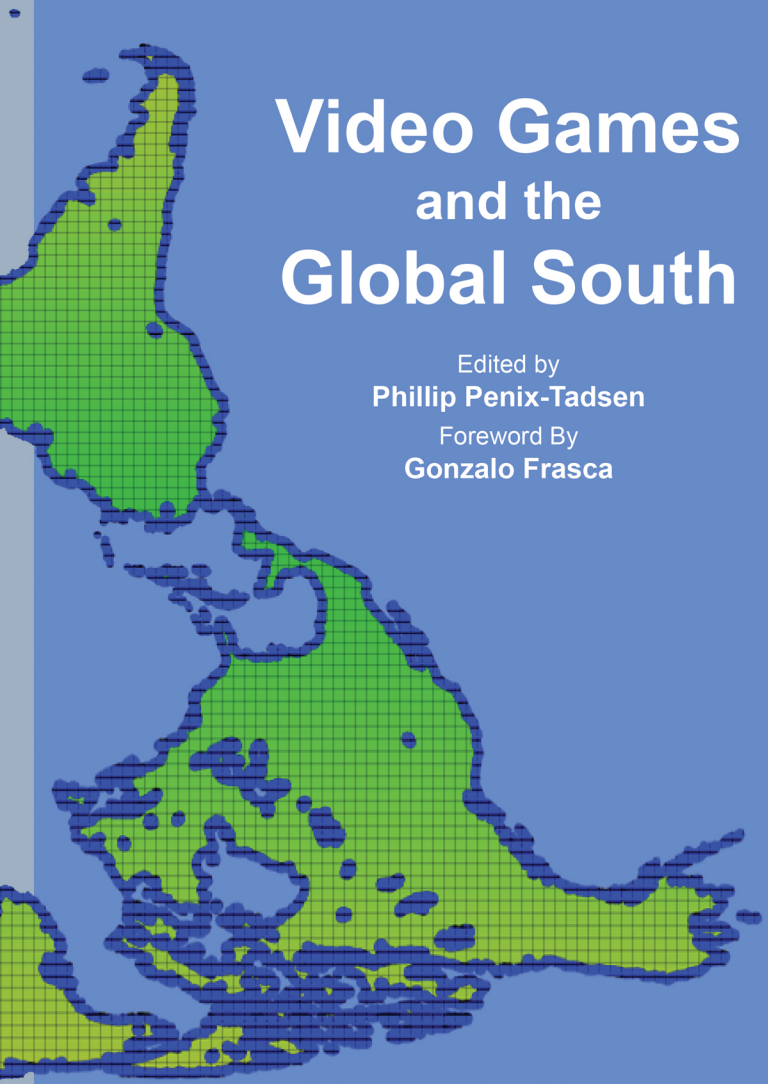

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LUDIC SOLIDARITY AND SOCIALITY

THE IMPACT OF DOTA 2 ON LIMA'S YOUTH

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INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING VIDEO GAMES AND YOUTH IN LIMA, PERU

Today's young generations are coming up in a world of technological reason that is continually redefining discourse and behavior, making socialization take on multiple forms across virtual platforms that multiply our connections and links to one another. Some would argue that our society is becoming less intelligent, with a marked division between the uninformed, ignorant masses and a cluster of experts who manage the knowledge and productive resources under the current economic model,[1] while others maintain that our access to new spaces through computerized and mediated communication enables increased participation in public debate, a more diverse set of voices and a better platform for cultural and political expression than in pre-digital society.[2] Rather than representing an irreconcilable divide, these two perspectives reflect a non-dogmatic debate that is open to multiple positions. Thus, communication technologies have allowed for the development of decentralized political practices in contemporary settings where politics has been transformed by expanded dynamics that exceed the conventional limits of political institutions.[3]

Undoubtedly, the development of new forms of narrative and communication changes things into something different from what they used to be, and in that process certain versions of the present take precedence over others.[4] However, this perspective could also be seen as a defensive reaction to the fear that a loss of shared identity might result in the total disappearance of society as a signifying social system.[5] Howard Rheingold takes umbrage with such a pessimist vision, arguing that these media offer consumers the power to create, publish, broadcast and debate their points of view.[6] But the question explored in this chapter is whether, in a post-human era,[7] contemporary consumers have the knowledge necessary to use these powerful instruments without abandoning our biological bodies or sacrificing essential values such as human dignity.

Ultimately, it is difficult to avoid a binary logic that hinders the analysis of subjects like the diminished, damaged and denied bodies that encounter positive feedback in the virtual realm, allowing them to forget their dissatisfaction with a social atmosphere characterized by denial and disapproval.[8] The artificiality of the body no longer runs counter to nature, but rather everything is

1. Antoni Brey, Daniel Innerarity and Goncal Mayos, *La sociedad de la ignorancia* [*Ignorance Society*], (Infonomia, 2009).
2. Douglas Kellner, *Cultura mediática, estudios culturales, identidad y política entre lo moderno y lo posmoderno* [*Media Culture, Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern*], (Akal, 2011).
3. Carlos Valderrama, "Sociedad de la información. Hegemonía, reduccionismo tecnológico y resistencias" ["Information Society: Hegemony, Technological Reductionism and Resistence"], *Nómadas* 36 (2012): 13-25.
4. Adolfo Estalella, "Ensamblajes de esperanza. Una etnografía del bloguear apasionado" ["Assemblies for Hope: An Ethnography of Dispassionate Blogging"], *Revista de Athenea Digital* 12 (2012): 161-174.
5. Miguel Fernández-Carrión, "Control social en la sociedad red" ["Social Control in Network Society"], *Revista Entelequia* 3 (2007): 146
6. Howard Rheingold, *Multitudes inteligentes, la próxima revolución social* [*Intelligent Multitudes: The Next Social Revolution*] (Gedisa, 2004).
7. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).
8. Arturo Rico, "Un filosofar desde el cuerpo para la sociedad de la información" ["A Philosophy of the Body for Information Society"], *Comunicación y sociedad* 24 (2015): 243-264.

part of the same organism, leading to the abandonment of the limitations of the body and transferal to a cybernetic plane.[9] Both respect and recognition remain utterly essential in spaces where intersubjective relationships are neither physical nor virtual, but irreducibly syncretic.

This integrated perspective on the relationship between gaming and everyday life characterizes this chapter's approach to the topic of video game play, which takes interactive technologies as a sort of persistent interface between the physical and virtual worlds. The chapter focuses on how video game spaces can facilitate interaction and inter-generational support, exploring the impact and consequences of virtual play on the overall life of players. This is done by analyzing the practices of young patrons of particular public LAN centers—establishments made to serve gamers and other internet users by renting out access to a high-speed Local Area Network in their computer labs/cafés—located in areas of Lima frequented by college students. The online game chosen for this study was *Dota 2* (Valve, 2013; also referred to as *Dota*), due to its massive popularity over the past several years, both internationally and among Peruvian gamers in particular. These *Dota* players refer to themselves as *doteros*, the term that will be used for the remainder of this chapter. What is remarkable about these doteros' particular practices is their preference for shared common spaces for social gameplay, which allow them more easily and flexibly coordinate each element of gameplay with the rest of the team.

This chapter uses the framework of virtual ethnography, which approaches the internet as an object in people's everyday lives and a site for community formation by examining the ways it is used, interpreted and reinterpreted by particular audiences.[10] Following the guidelines for data collection established by T. L. Taylor's scholarship on virtual ethnography,[11] research for this chapter included Interviews and short biographies of the members of the player group, as well as audiovisual recordings of several gameplay sessions that were published on a private Facebook group, in which players commented on the videos of their earlier play. Finally, the players involved in the study provided commentary on the final version of the chapter. This method connects symbolic interactionism, an interpretive focus, with research on participatory action, a critical focus. This type of work aims to incorporate participants as protagonists and critical authors of their own experiences.

The five players chosen for this chapter played together on a team they named *Last Resort*. The team's successes and achievements from 2013-2014 earned them popularity and prestige among *Dota 2* players in the city of Lima. To give a sense of the chosen subjects' context, it is worth sketching out some of the general traits of average gamers in Lima that can be observed in the major LAN centers where they gather: the players are almost entirely male; consumers range in age from 17 to 23; and finally, it is notable that the majority of them are in their last two years of high school and first three years of college, meaning they are circulating in a sort of liminal space of collective identity. The author of this chapter was able to establish a friendly relationship with each member of the team in 2014 thanks to an earlier friendship with Jacoby, a leading member who facilitated connections between the researcher and the group. Table 2.4.1 reviews each player's basic data. Analyzing the data collected, it can be seen that the ritual of online video game play has expanded completely beyond all rational expectations, becoming a common space for shared identities and the reinforcement of positive emotions in ludic contexts.[12] Each member of the participating team agreed that their

9. Sebastian Gómez, "TECNO-BÍOS: una aproximación bopolítica a la relación cuerpo – máquina en el contexto cibercultural contemporáneo" ["TECHNO-BIOS: A Biopolitical Approach to the Body-Machine Relationship in the Contemporary Cybercultural Context"], *Aisthesis* 52 (2012): 342-368.
10. Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (Sage, 2000): 64.
11. T. L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (MIT Press, 2009).
12. Regarding "Zone of residence in Lima": the Lima metropolitan area contains a total of 43 districts, which can be divided into four socio-economic zones: Lima Norte, Lima Sur, Lima Este and Lima Centro. Lima began to expand around 1950, increasing its urban radius beyond what had been Lima Centro. Due to their

capacity for establishing friendly ties improved as they became more and more fully integrated into the team.

Name	Sex	Age	District	Current level of studies	Zone of residence in Lima
Víctor	M	20	Santa Anita	University	Este
Taz	M	21	Jesús María	University	Centro
Humita	M	16	Los Olivos	High School	Norte
The Situation	M	19	Los Olivos	High School	Norte
Jacoby	M	19	Los Olivos	University	Norte

Table 2.4.1. Basic data on the members of Last Resort, the Dota team interviewed for this chapter.

PC GAMING ONLINE: THE *DOTA* PHENOMENON IN LIMA

Over the past several decades, video games have largely been reduced to a single-player experience. Shared games have been limited to mutual, timed competitions, as in the case of sports, fighting or racing games. But after 2009, when the console generation led by Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3 began to fully take advantage of online play, thousands of players across the globe were motivated by their competitive nature to connect to the web and share virtual spaces, allowing them to forge relationships and ties based on ludic commitment in order to secure their status as players among the many others across the globe.[13] While earlier computer games had already explored the possibility of bringing together players from different geographical locations, over the past decade, the city of Lima has seen a proliferation in the number of LAN centers, which have brought together the types of young people that in the past would have been stereotyped as problematic video game addicts. As established in the introduction to the this anthology, the rapid growth in online video game play has been a global phenomenon that has reached beyond social and economic divisions. Peru, as this chapter shows, was no exception.

However, these shared gaming spaces were laying the groundwork for something new: friendly face-to-face experiences were constructed upon the foundation of virtual experiences situated in real LAN centers. Unlike online connections in the privacy of one's home, where players generally stuck to conversations about game objectives, LAN centers fostered more complex connections and friendships due to the co-presence of the play experience. The stigmas that once reduced players to isolated and antisocial stereotypes started to fade away through these friendly gaming encounters, whose participants began to form dedicated player communities. Research by scholars such as Jansz and Martens has shown that LAN Centers were preferred due to the way they allow players to communicate with one another mid-game.[14] Cole and Griffiths refer to this as a feeling of being "more themselves," laying the groundwork for behaving without inhibitions or fear of being judged for one's

disproportionate growth, these zones began to be known pejoratively as *barriadas*, and later *conos*, before they came to be known under their current denomination as *zonas*.

13. Jerjes Loayza, "Sensibilidades y videojuegos en línea: un análisis de la frontera entre lo real y lo virtual en América Latina," *Austral* 20 (2011): 19-40.
14. Jeroen Jansz and Lonneke Martens, "Gaming at a LAN event: the social context of playing video games," *New Media & Society* 7.3 (2005): 333-355.

appearance.[15] Likewise, other analyses have offered further evidence of LAN centers' importance, such as Penix-Tadsen's research on cybercafés in Latin America[16] and Swalwell's long-term analysis of the Australasian case from 1999 to 2008.[17] As these researchers' work shows, LAN centers have frequently provided important links to socialization due to their capacity to bring their members closer together.

The popularity of online games played on PCs has generated continual growth in the population of players of multiplayer games, which in Peru's case have proven especially attractive to younger players in particular. However, at the same time, game rentals for consoles such as the Xbox One and PlayStation 4 have declined in Peru, due to the popularity of PC games that make room for ludic experiences within a shared physical space (see Image 2.4.1). On devices other than PCs, users' desire to win can sweep them away to a ludic exile where they can enjoy themselves without needing to look for other collaborators outside of their own comfort zones. PCs, however, act as an intermediary by establishing a bridge that connects users of diverse types and interests. For Latour, intermediaries are capable of overflowing the boundaries of the roles for which they were created, producing new possibilities with every step.[18] This is why LAN centers can be found in districts throughout the capital city regardless of the area's socioeconomic class or status: they enable young people to make meaningful connections with their peers.

Image 2.4.1. An online PC gaming center located in the popular Arenales mall, Lince district, city of Lima, 2014. This locale is a very popular site for gaming meetups, as it was one of the city's first.

In this context, the *Dota* phenomenon has brought together numerous players under a single umbrella

15. Helena Cole and Mark D. Griffiths, "Social Interactions in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Gamers," *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 10.4 (2007): 582.
16. Phillip Penix-Tadsen, *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America* (MIT Press, 2016): 51-53.
17. Melanie Swalwell, "Lan Gaming Groups: Snapshots from an Australasian Case Study, 1999-2008," *Gaming Cultures and Place in Asia-Pacific*, ed. Larissa Hjorth and Dean Chan (Routledge, 2009): 117-136.
18. Bruno Latour, *Reensamblar lo social* [*Reassembling the Social*] (Manantial, 2008).

(see Image 2.4.2). To use Beavis, Nixon and Atkinson's terminology, these spaces are characterized not only by their liminal nature but also for tolerance for ambiguity and capacity for enabling hybrid practices.[19] These types of online games bring together gamers in shared physical spaces, to battle teams from the same LAN center or from other locations in the city. They yell, they get angry, they burst out in laughter, they experience all sorts of sensations, and at times they stop to look around at their companions before returning to their seats. After a few hours, at the end of the match, they reminisce about the greatest moments and prepare to partake in some other sort of activity.

Image 2.4.2. Last Resort team members during an online competition against adversaries from the city of El Callao, 2013. CyberPlaza mall, Cercado district, city of Lima.

The *Dota* phenomenon brings together hundreds of young people across multiple LAN centers in Lima. It is usually played in teams of five doteros, and is won by those with the most well-defined strategy, as well as the most well-balanced group play. The number of players on a team can vary from one to five, however five-player teams are usually used in tournaments and for all competitive battles. Last Resort's fifth team member would vary depending on the demands and duties of each gamer, and therefore this spot was always reserved for a free player who may not necessarily belong to the team, but would join them on occasion to offer support. Jacoby explains each team member's role: the *Support* buys items that help everyone and has the primary duty of protecting the Hard-Carry until they can collect the items necessary to win the game; the *Semi-Carry* takes the center position, attacking and destabilizing the other team; and the *Hard-Carry* travels with these supporters while taking charge of "farming" and securing as much gold as possible in order to purchase large items that will allow them to defeat the other team. Each match lasts approximately 20 minutes to an hour, depending on the balance of skills between teams. There is no time limit, and the match ends when one of the teams surrenders and their base is destroyed.

19. Catherine Beavis, Helen Nixon and Stephen Atkinson. "LAN Cafés: Cafés, Places of Gathering or Sites of Informal Teaching and Learning?," *Education, Communication & Information* 5.1 (2005): 41-60.

Throughout Peru, there are groups of doteros with great potential, some of whom have even won international competitions. In the context of Lima, these teams don't just play to win: they also make considerable financial wagers. Added to this is the effervescence of the side-by-side ludic experience with the rest of the team, which reinforces friendly ties that transcend the space of the LAN center itself. According to Beavis, Nixon and Atkinson, LAN centers are transitory and ephemeral spaces that fulfill certain functions according to particular and specific conditions that are in constant flux.[20] As Trepte, Reinecke and Juechems have argued, offline social support reinforces the clan through shared activities that go beyond gameplay.[21] Thus, the LAN center exceeds its primary functional purposes and becomes a sort of context for social integration among these peers. In this way, mediators like PCs—and more specifically the video games played on them—function as processes rather than finished products, in more of a simultaneous and plural than a linear fashion, meaning we are dealing with technological mediators that are, to a greater or lesser degree, ludic distractors: they are the ritualized basis for social exchange among their members, which will always be developed hand-in-hand with the emotions and sensibilities that are shared by their players in real time.[22]

In order to examine the particular case analyzed in this chapter, the author joined a series of matches and tournaments from 2012 to 2013 along with the Last Resort team, consisting of Jacoby, Taz, The Situation, Víctor and Humita.[23] In addition, interviews were conducted with two former players. Analyzing the interactive experience of playing *Dota* means examining the particular attraction that this product has for its players. Víctor recalls his days as a dotero:

> In my own lifetime, *Dota* has turned 14 years old. I still remember back when I started in 10th grade! My friends and I would go to these internet centers where we played LAN and I can remember clearly that the owner of the place himself installed the game, which was the newest and greatest at the time, with all its impressive graphics and resolution, telling us, "Kids, I just brought you *Dota*." We started playing it, even though it was kind of hard to adapt to the game since it's a strategy game based on character choice.[24]

It is always difficult to get started, but when it comes to online PC games like *Dota*, there are friends that can help doteros feel more sure of themselves. This is abundantly apparent in the concerns expressed by Jaime Durán and Santiago Nieto, who observe that most users learn to play without the help of other humans, dabbling in a personal and solitary activity or limiting themselves to contact only with people who are already in the virtual space.[25] However, this perspective does not take into account that there are spaces in which the virtual and the real are highly permeable spheres.

Jacoby recalls his early days: "I got into playing Dota at an internet café because of my friends. It seemed really boring at first, but little by little I started to like it and get the hang of it—because it took a lot of skill and strategy." Jacoby's capabilities demonstrate that the types digital divides that are emerging as problems in the present day have less to do with technological platforms, and more to do with social relations. Marín and Gonzales argue that this divide is fundamentally cognitive, operating in the minds of individuals who are accustomed to the practice of symbolic skills, which are qualitatively different than instrumental skills.[26] Jacoby and his friends developed their capabilities in

20. Ibid.
21. Sabine Trepte, Leonard Reinecke and Keno Juechems, "The social side of gaming: How playing online computer games creates online and offline social support," *Computers in Human Behavior* 28.3 (2012): 837.
22. Marshall McLuhan, *La galaxia de Gutenberg* [*The Guttenberg Galaxy*] (Planeta, 1985).
23. At the players' request, their actual in-game pseudonyms are used in this chapter.
24. Unless otherwise noted, all team member quotations are cited from the author's field journal, 2013.
25. Jaime Durán and Santiago Nieto, *Mujer, sexualidad, internet y política: los nuevos electores latinoamericanos* [*Women, Sexuality, the Internet and Politics: New Latin American Voters*] (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006).

proportion with the game, a virtual mediator with the capacity to transform its users, who ceased to be isolated players and crossed over from a simulated dotero gameworld into a real, physical space.

Taz, a talented dotero who belonged to several important leagues and was also Jacoby's partner, explains that his early days playing *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000)[27] got him started on the path to playing *Dota*: "I was playing Counter-Strike online until a friend showed me how to play Dota for like a month, then I got hooked on playing and little by little I got better. I liked the game in general—all of my friends used to play and I used to watch and I enjoyed it all." Friendship became an important shared foundation for becoming a dotero, running counter to an individualist logic or rationale for gaming. The Situation, another member of Last Resort, reiterates the importance of friendship in his game choice: "My friends didn't make me play, it's just that my friends and I were always doing things together—if we weren't playing ball we were playing Dota with each other, and I was one of the few friends that kept playing not just for fun, but to learn more." These affective networks built around gaming do not contradict a supposedly entangled offline world or seemingly fleeting virtual networks,[28] but rather these distinctions tend to fade away in young people's social practices.

Playing *Dota* thus represents a way of sharing time together, of increasing group integration, encouraging greater team confidence, strengthening team instincts and the affective ties that characterize this practice. It is notable that this social space is crucial to the process of socialization through which these young people develop a notion of the social "self" and the generalized "other" that give structure to their personalities.[29] Being a dotero means combining virtual acts and real contexts, brought together in a vibrant, youthful identity that moves beyond this dichotomy and sees such experiences as an inseparably combined whole. This could be seen as the *Blade Runner* syndrome, which Carles Feixa and Yanko González use as a way of describing young people's wavering "between the will to break free and obedience to the adults who raised them, while they are at the same time thrust into artificial worlds such as online communities and different configurations of large-scale adolescent networks."[30] This allusion allows us to comprehend the way in which the networked foundations for an online game like *Dota* enable the development of a logic of socialization in which younger players seek to affirm their self-identities as part of constantly-self-renewing urban tribes capacitated by technological mediators that have become the circuits where young people's rites of passage take place. This is a means of compensating for the adult-centered exclusion with which they are faced on the job and in social environments due to their supposed lack of experience.

MULTIPLAYER CONNECTIVITY: TOWARD NEW AFFECTIVE COMMUNITIES

The interviews conducted for this chapter show that players are willing to give up a number of responsibilities in other areas of their lives due to their desire to play at every available moment. Each of the interviewees missed school at least once a month in order to play. One ex-dotero explains: "I got to the point of going to *dotear*[31] after leaving school with my friends, to the point where we started to skip classes. My friends' and my grade averages in high school went down. We had been good students, but some of us almost failed the year." Working and studying were the motivations that

26. Isidro Marín and Ramón González-Piñal, "Relaciones sociales en la sociedad de la información, hacia una noción de la intersubjetividad digital" ["Social Relations in Information Society: Toward a Notion of Digital Intersubjectivity"], *Prisma social* 6 (2011): 1-18.
27. Counter-Strike is another online PC game with a large number of players. While it cannot compare to the Dota phenomenon, it dominated PC gaming at the height of its popularity. It is still played today, with a number of fans placing it in second after Dota on their lists of favorite games.
28. Asur Fuente, Juan Herrero and Enrique Gracia, "Internet y apoyo social, sociabilidad online y ajuste psicosocial en la sociedad de la información" ["The Internet and Social Support, Online Sociability and Psychological Adjustment in Information Society"], *Acción psicológica* 1 (2010): 9-15.
29. George Mead, *Espíritu, persona y sociedad* [*Mind, Self and Society*] (Paidós Studio, 1990).
30. Yanko Gonzalez and Carles Feixa, *La construcción histórica de la juventud en América Latina: bohemios, rockanroleros y revolucionarios* [*The Historical Construction of Youth in Latin America: Bohemians, Rock-and-Rollers and Revolutionaries*] (Cuarto Propio, 2013): 111.
31. A recently coined neologism in Spanish, the verb "dotear" means "to play Dota."

ultimately drove these ex-doteros from their deep play practices. The current doteros in Last Resort are conscious of carefully scheduling their time so that they do not have to miss classes, which for two of them are now at the university level. However, back in his early days, Jacoby would "play hooky" by going to locales far from his home community in the Los Olivos district on the north side of Lima.

Initially, each member of Last Resort, as well as each of the ex-doteros, played the game in their own homes. Asked about the importance of sharing the same physical space, Taz replied: "It's best when everyone is playing together, that's the most ideal situation. But the missions just start out one step at a time, and if someone connects from their house and we play, it could still turn out fine, but it's not like when we're all together because things just turn out better. We can talk so that we get more combos." While Taz is conscious that the team cannot get together all the time, he prizes matches played face-to-face in common spaces over those played remotely online.

While playing with a group from home means finding a moment when everyone is available at the same time, it is even harder to get together physically due to the greater investment of time and effort required. The ideal situation for Jacoby also centers on dialogue with the rest of the team: "I mean, I can go either way—playing at the crib is comfortable, but when you play LAN with everyone else right next to you it's like there's more confidence, and you can point out the mistakes right that very second and stuff like that." Indeed, as shown in Sondgrass, Lacy, Dengah and Fagan's research, playing *World of Warcraft* with real-life friends allows players to transfer their online achievements and experiences to offline social networks, allowing them to overcome real-life conflicts and competitors.[32] After settling on *Dota* as his game of choice, Jacoby began to enjoy it in its entirety, identifying himself as part of a first-person plural, unlike many home console gamers.

> My friends and I started to play in the internet café in my neighborhood with our pals in 2009. We would play for fun from 4:00 to 8:00 in the evening, and it went on like that for a year. After a couple of months, another group of five buddies showed up and told us that to play we had to bet, and of course we accepted. I remember we won, and we felt really superior. Little by little more people started to show up and we would usually win with ease.

Dota is a video game that involves sports-like *roles* in a manner reminiscent of a soccer game among friends. Thinking back on his gaming days, one ex-dotero explained: "I started to distance myself from Dota a little bit, but I would get anxious for vacation to come so I could go back to the cybercafé. I had to pass all my classes to avoid going to summer school, and I did that. I was undefeated, and I would dedicate hours to playing at home, then I'd lie and say I was going to play ball so I could go get together with my friends and keep playing Dota on LAN." Although Víctor resorted to lying to be able to go out with his friends and play video games, the parallel he draws between the soccer ball and the PC holds true: it is the object that provides the pretense the group needs to come together, interact and exchange experiences through shared play.

These new social networks thus become potential sources of mutual support, especially given their potential benefits for individuals with difficulty in face-to-face social interactions, or those at risk of social isolation and exclusion.[33] Thus we can see how cooperation—which in its best manifestations has provided the origin for the greatest works of human civilization—goes beyond the foul ends that authors such as Rheingold so feared.[34] Indeed, as Reer and Krämer have established, one important

32. Jeffrey G. Snodgrass, Michael G. Lacy, HJ Francois Dengah II and Jesse Fagan, "Enhancing One Life Rather than Living Two: Playing MMOs with Offline Friends," *Computers in Human Behavior* 27.3 (2011): 1211-1222.
33. Fuente, Herrero and Gracia, "Internet y apoyo social, sociabilidad online y ajuste psicosocial en la sociedad de la información," 13
34. Howard Rheingold, *Multitudes inteligentes, la próxima revolución social* [*Intelligent Multitudes: The Next Social Revolution*] (Gedisa, 2004).

effect of this video game genre is establishing offline links among members, enhancing their social capital through physical proximity, familiarity, ongoing communication and enrichment of friendship among players.[35] As Swalwell argues in her research on LAN centers, these locations cannot compete with the comfort of home, even if one's home has very high internet connection speeds, because players prefer face-to-face interaction: for them, there is nothing better than "being there," and for this reason it is hard to imagine LAN centers disappearing any time in the near future.[36] We are dealing with spaces that enable deeply-rooted and highly structured socialization among each of the clan's members.

When questioned about their favorite memories of their experiences as *Dota* players, the members of Last Resort cited friendship as the most salient value, showing that these networks are capable of "renovating communities through the strengthening of ties that connect us to the non-immediate social world while they simultaneously expand our power in that world."[37] The Situation explains:

> There were a lot of things, but the thing I remember most was when my friends and I stayed up all night in a cybercafé and played *Dota* almost all night long, and in some way I felt happy, because after that we would talk to each other every day about how to improve our game, and that brought us together even more, since we were alsofriends online. I would say that the best thing is how you get to know someone better by playing the game with them, because in the game you express yourself in a certain, more free way, I'd say, but emotions take place not only during gameplay, but also outside of the game. We would think back on what we had played so we could correct our mistakes, and even though sometimes we would criticize each other, it all brought us closer together and allowed us to grow as a team.

A good team is one that is able to help its players rise above their differences through the amicable trust they are able to share with one another, as well as the ability to criticize one another without feeling shamed by those critiques, though it may mean being insulted. The Situation was one of those most frequently criticized by Jacoby during one training, but unlike Taz, who would reply with anger to every criticism, The Situation would keep quiet. Was he bothered by this habit? The Situation replied in a cheerful tone: "Well, if that insult were coming from somebody I didn't know and didn't trust, I'd be uncomfortable with that person doing it and it would bother me, but with Jacoby we've known each other for a long time, and if he insults me, I insult him back twice as badly and we just keep going on like that." Insults, shouts and complaints during gameplay appeared to have little consequence, other than to help drive the team toward victory.

Due to the mutual trust between all the members of Last Resort, which was the result of all of those post-*Dota* get-togethers, they felt free to insult one another and be insulted without experiencing further frustration. This was reflected in their responses to a video of a team training match, displayed for team members only through the Facebook group. Jacoby had been the most hot-tempered, and upon seeing the video he reflected: "It's better not to shout, even if I'm the team member most prone to rage and I usually shout at people myself. But I've learned to control myself and to be more tolerant over the past month, because it can freak out other players and it's better if they're calm. I'm the one who usually gets the most frustrated when things don't go my way, but I'm getting better." Indeed, these types of insults and other forms of criticism between teammates are forbidden during official tournament play.

35. Felix Reer and Nicole C. Krämer, "Underlying Factors of Social Capital Acquisition in the Context of Online-Gaming: Comparing *World of Warcraft* and *Counter-Strike*," *Computers in Human Behavior* 36 (2014): 179-189.
36. Swalwell, "Lan Gaming Groups," 133.
37. Peter Kollock and Marc Smith, *Comunidades en el ciberespacio* [*Communities in Cyberspace*] (UOC, 2003): 20.

For Taz, shouts and derogatory comments during training are to be expected, however "it's different in a tournament—we don't talk at all—it's different." It's important to feel safe, and if one cannot find safety on a team, the slightest trace of mental weakness during a tournament can end up hurting the group. Jacoby explains it in this way:

> It's tough to beat the first-class players.[38] I've played a few times against them, and we put up a fight, but experience always wins in the end. And I think it's a psychological thing, because your team isn't as famous as theirs, and they're well known, and people support them, and if you do something wrong they insult you or they follow behind you talking trash. Half the time those people end up getting tilted[39] and the other players that know them don't say anything to them, so they end up screwing everything up.

As Nussbaum has explained, emotions tend to connect us to elements that we may consider essential to our wellbeing, but which are not completely within our own control. This is why "emotion registers that sensation of vulnerability and imperfect control: if there is no emotion, we have the right to say that there are no complete or total judgments."[40] In contexts of trust and friendship, these conflicts are forms of what Joaquín Linne has referred to as *multimidad* or "multi-intimacy," meaning links that reveal new configurations of subjectivity, public and private life that exhibit certain intimate content as part of their performances of self-presentation.[41]

Jacoby also shared, by way of his gaming experience, how threats can arise in relation to bad relations between team members: "I made three good friends on that team, but unfortunately I didn't get along that well with one of them because he felt some sort of rivalry or something, and he and I would always have conflicts. I didn't like him and he didn't like me." According to Jacoby, this person tainted the group's harmony. The dotero context allows for no fragmentation, because it could end up doing the group in and putting an end to not only their shared victories, but also the friendships gained, which are the result of the key social element of *Dota* play, the factor most frequently cited by team members. As The Situation explained, this game allows players to get to know one another, sharing in a lived experience that allows them to do away with more formal appearances, letting out their most intense jubilation along with their most spiteful rage. This is explained in an image posted on one of the doteros' Facebook walls, which includes the following caption:

> Thanks to *Dota*: I Learned basic English; I de-stress and have fun in a healthy way; I have greater musical appreciation; I am free from the vices that are common to other young people; I exercise my mind much more than by watching TV; I have made great friends; I feed my imagination; I challenge my skills; I never get bored; I challenge my mental abilities, my reflexes, etc.; I've acquired a new appreciation for technological art, etc.[42]

One of the most highly-rated comments on the image states: "Dota is super-sketchy, even more so if you play in *pubs*."[43] Stress could add to the fragmentation of the team, however unlike with other single-player video games, doteros can turn to mutual encouragement from their clan, an important form of emotional support that can correlate to their success in tournaments. This is why, for The

38. Here, Jacoby is referring to the highest competitive level in Dota, out of three levels: the weakest is Low Skill, characterized by those who play just for fun, of whom there are many in the local cybercafés. The second level is Mid Skill, where doteros with a longer history of playing as well as those who play at more regular intervals can be found. Finally, first place is occupied by High Skill players, who are always the ones to compete in tournaments, ending up as finalists in many of them. The names of the teams and their members are nationally and internationally known, thanks to regular online tournaments.
39. Getting "tilted" is gaming terminology for experiencing feelings of fear, anger or insecurity, which cause the player to make constant mistakes.
40. Martha Nussbaum, *Paisajes del pensamiento* [*Upheavals of Thought*] (Paidós, 2008): 66.
41. Joaquín Linne, "La 'multimidad': performances íntimas en Facebook de adolescentes de Buenos Aires" ["'Multi-Intimacy': Intimate Performances by Buenos Aires Adolescents on Facebook"], *Estudios Sociológicos* 100 (2016): 65-84.
42. Quoted from Jacoby's Facebook wall, December 2013.
43. Pubs are play sessions meant just for relaxation, where no money or tournament position is in play. In Dota tournament games, one can clearly see the doteros' intense mutual respect and the ways they take care of their fellow team members. In a high-stakes game, there is no room for insults or distractions.

Situation, winning and conquering is not just something you do for the sake of winning, for him "it's about spending time with your friends," as he stated on one occasion when congratulated on a win.

As a final reflection, *Dota* demonstrates how *non-place* is linked to *place*, to use Marc Augé's terminology.[44] The non-place is constituted by virtual online networks of play, which could make for a cold space of selfish, individualist behaviors. However, it is linked to the place constituted through interactions among players, not only in LAN centers, but also outside of them, where they collectively partake in a variety of activities in different spaces of socialization that unify their members, bringing them closer to forms of face-to-face coexistence:

> With them, I learned to play a different way that was more competitive—it wasn't just for fun, it was the feeling of beating people who've played longer than you and taking their five *soles* every game, that was great. It was awesome cracking ourselves up afterward and seeing where we'd messed up while we'd eat some burgers and sodas. Since we would always bet people who played on normal level and higher, we would win some and lose some.

When Taz reflects on his future with *Dota*, he observes: "I treat it like a work/game and I plan to play it for many years until I reach my potential." When all is said and done, the best thing for Taz has to do with "good friendships, and also some serious trash talk, plus money or prizes like a new mouse or something like that." Although Taz seems to enjoy himself even more when faced with the challenge of continually improving his performance, friendship and ludic sociality are fundamental elements of any good team. This is echoed by past and present doteros, who have experienced intense moments of collective effervescence. Who said video games were bad for you?

CONCLUSION: LUDIC SOLIDARITY AND SOCIALITY IN *DOTA*

An ethnographic review of the most active groups of doteros on social media showed a large number of memes that laud the virtues of the game, with thousands of "likes" and comments. The photos published there have been shared an average of 300 to 500 times among the whole *Dota* community. Many of these memes are used by players to make fun of themselves, their excesses and their defects. In the same way, through face-to-face connections they come to deal with moments of stress, learning to withstand insults as long as they are backed by a desire to collaborate and the shared goal of improving as a team.

The video games in these LAN centers fulfill a vitally important social function: far from isolating them, they bring young people together around their computers to build friendships in the time before, during and after their gameplay sessions. Socialization makes games like *Dota* intermediaries, agents who transcend their makers, allowing players to use simulations as a pretext for playing pertinent roles through ludic rituals that prepare their participants for contexts in which they will have control over their own lives, learning to make collective and shared decisions.

The group of friends with whom one shares and collaborates in video game play can function as a key cornerstone, allowing communities of gamers to enrich the meaning of their interactions and further strengthening their social ties. Today, four years after the research for this chapter began, Jacoby still misses being able to give himself over completely to playing *Dota* at the LAN center: "I wish I were 16 years old again and I could just play, with no responsibilities. When you're losing and you come back, it makes you yell and feel alive!" Nowadays, The Situation and Jacoby continue to play together, although they know nothing of Humita, for whom Jacoby shows concern: "he was my buddy and I

44. Marc Augé, *Los no lugares, espacios de anonimato* [*Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*] (Gedisa, 1998).

miss him." In contexts like the LAN centers where Last Resort, other teams of Peruvian doteros and other players across the globe get together to play and form lasting relationships, gamers are not just surrounded by their team members, but by friends for life.

Translated from the Spanish by Phillip Penix-Tadsen

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