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Politics at *The Heart of Gaming*. A Critical Retrospective of *gamescom* 2019

Kathrin Trattner

Abstract

Report on 2019's edition of the world's largest gaming event, *gamescom*, held in Cologne, Germany.

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At the time of writing this report, the thought of indoor-mega events feels fairly odd. In spring 2020, amidst a global pandemic and concurrent worldwide lockdowns, images of huge crowds eagerly pushing into gigantic exhibition halls seem to be entirely from another lifetime. According to the organizers, in August 2019, 373.000 persons – gamers, fans, and industry professionals alike – visited *gamescom* in Cologne, Germany (gamescom 2019). It is the world's largest gaming event in terms of the number of visitors as well as the size of the exhibition area with over 1.100 exhibiting companies on 218.000 square meters (gamescom 2019). Besides the fact that hundreds of thousands of people physically attended the four-day-event, the organizers state in their final report that "in the first days alone, the video content of *gamescom* was called up far more than 100 million times worldwide" (gamescom 2019). In August 2020, this number is likely to rise considerably as the entire event will take place online (gamescom 2020b): All the more reason to take a look back at

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last year's event, when packed exhibition halls and colorful cosplay contests were still a physical reality. I spent one day at *gamescom* 2019, at *the heart of gaming*, as the organizers put it in their slogan, and what struck me the most was not only the sheer size of the event, but also the many questions it raised for me as a researcher regarding the complex and multifaceted relationship between (German) politics and gaming on several levels.

The Heart of Gaming

One day is not enough to experience such a mammoth-event, as I discovered. Too little time on the one hand and too much on display on the other hand left me wandering around a little aimlessly and slightly overwhelmed. Besides the accompanying events such as eSports-tournaments or *gamescom congress*, a conference with panel discussions and workshops (more on that later), the fair itself consisted of eleven exhibition halls on two levels comprising not only the display of games, but also of technology, organizations and businesses.

Among the game-exhibitors were most of the world's largest AAA-studios and producers promoting their latest or upcoming releases as well as small independent studios in a separate hall, the *Indie Village*. To me, this was by far the most rewarding part of the fair concerning actual game content: Not only were the games themselves more accessible to try out, but in many cases the developers were also there, which made it possible to find out more about a game and its specific production.





Figure 1. Fans awaiting entry into *gamescom* © Koelnmesse GmbH, Thomas Klerx.

Overall, I came with little to no expectations of what new games I might discover or even try out and decided to simply let myself drift through the event. The only game that I had actually planned on playing was the newest *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019) release, which in retrospect painfully reveals how naively unexperienced I was with such events. The sight of endless lines and people in camping chairs patiently awaiting their turn, far beyond the sign that indicated a waiting time of approximately four hours from that point, made it clear to me that this was a kind of commitment I could definitely not muster. Perhaps there is a certain line between enjoying playing games and actual fandom.



Jet Fighters and Radicalization Simulators

As I mentioned earlier, the perhaps most lasting impression *gamescom* left on me concerned the highly interesting entanglements with politics that became visible in several contexts. Besides German politicians discussing national video game funding at the opening conference (Benrath 2019) and playing *FIFA* (2019) in front of cameras, it was two institutions that stood out in particular for me: The German armed forces and the *Verfassungsschutz*, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, of the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia (in short NRW). I was confronted with the presence of the former before I had even entered the premises as I was handed a flyer by a peace organization criticizing the army's recruitment efforts in the context of *gamescom*.



Figure 2. German politicians playing video games after opening *gamescom* © Koelnmesse GmbH, Uwe Weiser.



In 2018, the year before, the army was heavily criticized for advertising its presence at *gamescom* with slogans like "Multiplayer at its best", which many viewed as a problematic conflation of gaming and actual warfare, thereby trivializing the latter (Au 2018). As Gießler from the German newspaper *Zeit* argued, the army's presence at *gamescom* can be attributed to the fact that it is the ideal place to appeal to a young tech-savvy crowd which makes for an attractive recruitment pool (Gießler 2019). Accordingly, their booth was to be found in the career section.

It featured a virtual reality jet fighter simulator, a reaction test, and a programming quiz. When I passed the booth several times, it did not seem to attract a lot of attention. However, what was interesting to me: Since there was arguably a lot of discussion concerning the army's presence at *gamescom* within the media and outside the fairgrounds, I was somewhat surprised to see that none of this was noticeable within the hall itself. Whereas the army's presence at the event did not really surprise me, given the historically tightly-knit relationship between gaming and the military on several levels, the Verfassungsschutz of NRW did baffle me a bit, I must admit – not necessarily its presence itself, but rather the way it presented itself. The communication strategy applied at the booth was decidedly provocative. It featured a German flag with three holes burnt into it, each revealing different symbols: The abbreviation HKNKRZ, a well-known code of the extreme right, ISIS' variant of the black banner, and a red circle-A, the best-known symbol of anarchism. The use of these three symbols caused a lot of critical discussion on the Internet on whether the circle-A which has long entered popular culture and is not unconstitutional in Germany can really be conflated with the other two (Schröder 2019, Wienand 2019, Klös, Balduf and Simond 2019). Herbert Reul, interior minister of NRW, argued that they wanted to point out that anti-democratic forces from all sides of the political spectrum are dangerous (Wienand 2019). Religious extremism aside, one could argue



that this kind of equation of right-wing and left-wing extremism as two sides of the same coin is not only highly simplistic, but also problematic as it has the potential to relativize the former – an issue that demands particular watchfulness of in the context of German politics and society.

However, to take a step back, a central question remains: What is the *Verfassungsschutz* doing at a gaming fair, anyways? Other than the army, recruiting future personnel did not seem to be the major motivation, but rather educating the public. NRW's interior ministry argued that due to the large number of visitors, many of whom are younger than 24, *gamescom* is the ideal venue to directly approach a young audience (Wienand 2019). The booth featured a quiz designed to test the participants' knowledge about extremism and a virtual reality application that was supposed to provide insights into Salafist radicalization tactics.

The German podcast *Pixeldiskurs*, that dedicated an episode to NRW's *Verfassungsschutz* at *gamescom*, raised the question whether the aim of educating the public about anything other than their own work is actually within the scope of the defined tasks and purpose of the *Verfassungsschutz* (Klös, Balduf and Simond 2019). They point out that in Germany, such tasks are clearly attributed to organizations such as the Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2018), that is specifically created for the purpose informing and educating the public on political and civic issues.





Figure 3. NRW's *Verfassungsschutz* opted for a provocative booth © Pixeldiskurs.

Besides the question of the legitimacy of NRW's *Verfassungsschutz's* presence at *gamescom* itself, what left the most lasting impression on me was the, as I would argue, partly problematic presentation of content. Particularly the representation of Islamist extremism, that aimed at being approachable to young people through satire, ended up using imagery that drew on recognizable religious and racial stereotypes. This begs the question whether satire based on an outsider-look really is the right approach to sensitizing a young crowd concerning the topic. In this regard, Behnam Said, a German Islam scholar and former intelligence service analyst, pointed out that the danger of trying to expose extremism through humor lies in offending one's actual target group which can, then, bring forth the opposite of the desired outcome – particularly if a government agency communicates in this way (Baumsteiger 2019).

A Space for Discussion?

Like the German army's presence at *gamescom*, the *Verfassungsschutz*'s booth was also a topic that journalists and commentators on social media critically engaged with. Again, within the halls themselves, not much critical engagement was noticeable. It was a strange discrepancy: Politics seemed to be everywhere around me, yet nobody inside appeared to notice or much less discuss this. The one place where discussions did take place was gamescom congress. According to the organizers, "gamescom congress is Europe's leading conference on the potential of computer and video games for society as well as the economy" (gamescom 2020a). It was held during one day of gamescom and featured talks, panel discussions and workshops on topics such as esports, inclusion and gaming, media literacy, the EU and gaming, artificial intelligence, and many more. Although by far not all of the discussed topics revolved around political issues, the tightly-knit relationship between gaming and politics specifically in Germany became clear once more to me as the congress was opened by a panel discussion featuring representatives of all major German parties except for the extreme-right AfD. As the official homepage states: "In the 'Debatt(I)e Royale' – the Political Arena at gamescom – top politicians discuss topics that move the gamescom community. This will provide a platform for a direct exchange between politics and the digital generation, which is urgently needed" (gamescom congress 2019).

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Figure 4. The conference's opening discussion *Debatt(l)e Royale* © Koelnmesse GmbH, Oliver Wachenfeld.

Moderated by streamers, the politicians discussed their positions on issues such as federal funding for the gaming industry or the need for high-speed Internet – a particularly painful topic in Germany. As Mick Prince from the platform *Belltower News* points out, the opening discussion solely focused on questions of policymaking that are interesting to the gaming community on a practical level, thereby completely omitting discussions of sociopolitical issues related to gaming such as hate speech or the strategic role gaming platforms play for the extreme right, for instance (Prinz 2019). Sociopolitical topics were, indeed, discussed in the context of *gamescom congress*, yet in panel discussions and workshops with far less reach than the opening *Debatt(l)e Royal* and without politicians. I wondered whether this may have to do with organizers and politicians trying to appeal to a quite vocal part of the gaming community that generally rejects political discussions in the context of gaming as soon as they move towards inclusion and diversity. However, I found that many of the congress' program points did, indeed, touch on highly interesting and important topics and issues in this regard. For instance, the workshop hosted by



Georg Hobmeier and Abdullah Karam on the creation of *Path Out* (2017), a free-to-play RPG which is based on Abdullah's experiences as he had to flee Syria, in my opinion would have deserved much more audience and attention. Overall, it appeared to me that despite being part of *gamescom*, discussions like these felt very far away from the great majority of visitors that were not professionals, journalists, or researchers, and many of whom did not attend *gamescom congress* because it required a separate ticket.

Summary

Although I only spent one day at gamescom 2019, I did learn a few things: First, I realized more than ever that gamers are a contested and much-courted target group, not only in an economical but also in a political sense. This indicates a long-overdue realization in many parts of society that gaming is not a niche phenomenon, but that wanting to reach out to young people means having to reach out to gamers. Second, I would argue that at *gamescom*, the critical reflection of sociopolitical issues connected to games and gaming mostly takes place at the margins of the event. This was in itself no surprise, but it was made so much clearer through the strange discrepancy between this lack of discussion in the course of the main fair itself on the one hand and the overwhelming presence of political institutions on the other hand. Third, I learned that gamers really love merchandise – a lot. And fourth, I also learned something about myself, which I should have already known before: I am far too impatient to wait in line for hours to try out a new game – or maybe just not passionate enough. In 2020, when nothing is the same as it was, a trip to gamescom will also look vastly different. It will be interesting to see what a completely online event will look like and, perhaps, in the specific case of gamescom, this will not only be a setback, but also an opportunity.



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