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narrative

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.

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.

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(l)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).

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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