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The Subject in Times of Media and Social Change. The Analytic Potential of the Mediatization Approach Using the Case of Retro Gaming

Abstract. The study focuses on the question of the mediatized constitution of subject and subjectivity, which, surprisingly, has received little attention so far. The analytical reference to the mediatization approach enables a holistic understanding of subject, communication and media. Using the empirical example of the media (sub)culture of retro games, this article empirically examines the extent to which gamers are influenced by the spaces of experiences of games, not only in the moment of playing them, but also in the long term, with regard to their personal development and social community. The findings illustrate two dimensions of subjectivation processes: on the one hand, the reflective handling of computer games and thus the subjectivation through games and game contexts, on the other hand, the nostalgic recollection of specific games and game contexts, which can be clearly separated analytically from the first dimension.

Keywords: mediatization; nostalgia; retro games; subjectivation

Introduction

The focus of the contribution is the question of the medial constitution of subject and subjectivity. From the perspective of communication studies, this research interest appears increasingly relevant, for since "the individual (...) constitutes itself as a subject through communication and social relations, media change also has an effect on the constitution of the subject" (Krotz, 2017a, p. 31, own translation). With the help of the concept of "moulding force" of media (Hepp, 2012), the study tries to concretize the demand of Friedrich Krotz (2019) to bring together considerations from mediatization and subjectivation research in order to investigate the transformation of subjects more appropriately in today's context of rapid media and cultural

Pobrane z czasopisma Mediatizations Studies **http://mediatization.umcs.pl**
Data: 13/11/2026 07:25:24

change. From a communication science perspective, the mediatization approach is recommended as an introduction to this complex issue for several reasons: it represents a holistic approach that can bring together numerous aspects of the current and complex process of change in an explorative way, both theoretically and empirically (cf. in more detail Krotz, 2017b). From this perspective, subjects and subjectivation processes are to be seen in relation to communicative and media practices and the individual processing of related experiences, which, in turn, are closely linked to social contexts and processes (e.g. Carstensen, Schachtner, Schelhowe, & Beer, 2014) and which have a strong influence on individual and collective biographies (e.g. Hoffmann, Krotz, & Reißmann, 2017). Mediatization research is strongly linked to the media analysis of the cultural studies and takes social and cultural contexts into account in the empirical analysis of communication processes. Consequently, phenomena of practice, coordination, communitization and socialization are empirically considered as well as the symbolic forms of explicit and implicit knowledge. From an analytical point of view, this brings personal and situational conditions of communication into view. Thus, tangible communication frameworks, roles, motifs and content as well as the mutually connected and distinguishable aspects of media as technologies, social institutions, and social fabric and thus socially and technically unfolded spaces of experience are to be looked into (cf. in detail Krotz, 2017b). To what extent the mediatization approach enables a deeper understanding of the relationship between subjects and media should be investigated through an empirical case study. In doing so, the "forgotten subject" (Krotz, 2019) in the field of communication science is problematized (section 2). Building on this, the mediatization approach is briefly characterized (section 3). Using the empirical example of the media (sub)culture of retro gamers as an example (section 4) it is then empirically shown to what extent computer games shape media users not only in the moment of computer gaming, but also in the long term with regard to their personal development and social community (section 5). The concluding section puts the findings of the case study into a more general context.

Subject and Subjectivation from the Point of View of Communication Science

In communication science, disciplinary material and formal objects were for a long time very closely tied to mass communication or public communication. More complex notions of individuality and subjectivity, socialization and communitarization were therefore hardly developed within this discipline, but derived primarily from concepts of "media use and reception" or "audience". The dictum "What do people do with the media?", which goes hand in hand with the development of the Uses-and-Gratifications approach (Rosengren, Wenner, & Palmgreen, 1985), has also been adopted, but only led to the consideration and aggregation of reified motives of

Pobrane z czasopisma Mediatizations Studies **http://mediatization.umcs.pl**
Data: 13/11/2026 07:25:24

individuals. Accordingly, the "active recipient" in this context is usually only someone who selects media services for reception on the basis of rational and reflected needs (cf. Dahlgren, 2013). In addition, activities of understanding and mediating, of appropriation and use of media in interaction with changing social and cultural frameworks and conditions have so far been more strongly addressed in communication studies solely within the framework of cultural studies or in relation to Pierre Bourdieu's habitus approach.

A broad communication science examination of the subject's differentiated "activities", which have been well received in various disciplines, has hardly taken place to date. This notwithstanding, "the subject" in communication science has hitherto been handled rather unspecifically and in some cases not always in a clear-cut way in relation to other constructs such as, in particular, "actor" and "individual" on the one hand, and "identity" and "self-image" on the other. Prototypically, Ramón Reichert (2008, p. 47, own translation) refers to the broad conceptual field of dealing with media-mediated processes of subjectivation in a broad sense:

> In the discussion about the significance of self-thematization in blogs, wikis, chats and forums, a kind of semantic conceptual field has recently emerged with which attempts are made to define the practices of subjectivation. This semantic network stretches between the terms "identity work", "biography work", "self narration" and "self management" and is characterized by an emphatic concept of individuality.

Building on this, on the one hand, the question as to whether the subject is constituted in specific direct interaction or media-mediated communication processes and what role the (media-mediated) reference to a socio-cultural knowledge plays, and if so, in which mode this reference is made, is not clarified. On the other hand, it has not yet been explicitly worked out how the relationship between subject and identity can be conceived under the conditions of a media society.

In the mediatized forms of contemporary social and cultural life, the previous disciplinary approaches are no longer sufficient, also because the development of the media raises new questions. In the mediatized worlds of the 21st century, the individual constitutes himself as an acting subject, especially in relation to ubiquitous and in many respects dominant digital media: in its media-related actions, it is actively involved in the production of social realities, it participates in various cultural and social processes, it projects itself into the net, it continuously develops himself further above and in relation to this in social relationships, and at the same time in work and leisure it permanently participates in forms of community and socialization. From a critical perspective, however, it also sees itself confronted with calls for self-direction, self-organisation and self-socialization (cf. e.g. Bröckling, 2016). In conclusion, it can be said that the subject constituting itself in its communicative relations should be understood as a process that takes place in an active confrontation with the change of

Pobrane z czasopisma Mediatizations Studies **http://mediatization.umcs.pl**
Data: 13/11/2026 07:25:24

the media and its cultural and social implications. Beyond media change, however, the social framework conditions for communication have also changed significantly, not least due to the massively influential processes of globalisation and commercialisation.

Further arguments can be formulated from the point of view of mediatization approach. Thus, at the centre of the notion of mediatization is the observation that communication is transformed by media and cultural change and in turn has an impact on them. This seemingly trivial statement gains in significance and scope when one realizes that communication is regarded as a central mechanism for the construction of our reality but also of socialization and enculturation of the subjects (cf. fundamentally Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Likewise, social and cultural structures such as hierarchy and power inscribe themselves into individuals via communicative processes in order to be reproduced or changed by them. In the current debate, the sovereign and sometimes creative power of individuals to communicate is questioned, e.g. from the perspective of dispositive analysis following Foucault (e.g. Lepa, Krotz, & Hoklas, 2014) or from the perspective of critical theory (e.g. Chandler & Fuchs, 2019). Current research therefore focuses on questions about the power of actors to act in relation to techniques and artefacts, the nature and significance of individual ideas in view of an omnipresent and profound interweaving of reality with (medial) techniques and objects. From an interdisciplinary perspective, the analytical connection between subjectivity and communication or between sociological and communication-scientific approaches is undoubtedly suitable for examining the mechanisms of subjectivation processes or the constructions of reality in more detail. However, communication science has yet to turn its attention to the largely forgotten considerations of the relationship between culture and nature that psychoanalysis focuses on (e.g. Johanssen & Krüger, 2016), as well as to a critical analysis beyond critical theory (e.g. Tomanić Trivundža et al., 2018).

Mediatization and the Subject

The approach of mediatization describes a complex meta-process of social change that is embedded in people's media communication practices (cf. Krotz, 2017b). Two dimensions characterize this overall process: the availability and distribution of media and the extent of everyday media-related (mediatized) actions are constantly increasing in quantitative terms. But also from a qualitative point of view, media shape the various cultural and social contexts in terms of their meaning, e.g. the everyday world of the people in which they are embedded. At the level of everyday life, media have thus become constitutive for personal development and the maintenance of the social (cf. fundamentally Hepp, 2013a). Dealing with the media of interactive communication transforms people's social interaction situations and everyday experiences as well as individual socialization processes and social socialization conditions, so that

Pobrane z czasopisma Mediatizations Studies **http://mediatization.umcs.pl**
Data: 13/11/2026 07:25:24

everyday life and everyday media life or socialization and media socialization hardly seem analytically separable anymore (cf. Krotz, 2017b). Following Andreas Hepp, digital communication media in particular unfold not so much a specifically graspable force of action, but rather a force of influence that can be described as extensive, which nevertheless can be reconstructed to a high degree contextually and cannot be reduced to a specific media logic and its "direct" effects (Hepp, 2013a). Hepp (2013b, p. 619f.) notes that:

> (…) the term "moulding force" is intended to capture the specificity of a medium in the process of communication. (…) More in detail, the expression "moulding forces" captures two processes related with the media, i.e. their institutionalisation and their reification. (…) (t)he term *institutionalisation* means not only the habitualisation of social action, but additionally a *reciprocal* typification of habitualised actions on the part of particular types of actor (…). Reification captures the notion that besides constituting an institutionalisation, each medium is also a set of technical apparatuses.

Especially in the increasingly popular computer games and their virtual spaces of experiences, players find not only pure entertainment, but also offers of meaning that are connected with the processes of communicative institutionalization and reification – not only at the moment of computer gaming, but also in the long run with regard to their personal development and social community. The "institutionalization" of computer games can thus be understood as the communicative appropriation of games, gaming and game contexts, which – as postulated in this article – can manifest itself, among other things, in the individual and/or collective processes of subjectivation. The "reification" of computer games can be clearly seen in the case of retro games, where their materiality or physical characteristics play a role that should not be underestimated in the self-understanding as so-called retro gamers and associated practices. Hepp (2010, p. 74) indirectly points out, however, that the level of knowledge about media influence with regard to its characteristics and dimensions as well as its role in the process of mediatization of society as a whole – and ultimately also its significance for (media) socialization and associated processes of subjectivation – is still very low and awaits detailed empirical analyses (for initial empirical case analyses, see Hepp, Bozdag, & Suna, 2011; Hepp, Berg, & Roitsch, 2014). Steffen Lepa et al. (2014, p. 217, own translation) clarify that the outlined subsequent processes of media communication do not happen solely on the levels of perception, participation, communitization, representation or emotion, but are also in a direct, still to be explored, relation to processes of subjectivation, which, however, must always be contextualized:

> On the other hand, such developments never take place only as individual processes of subjectivation in the direct relationship between man and medium, but are always socially contextualized, i.e. they must be processed and appropriated as experiences in a commu-

Pobrane z czasopisma Mediatizations Studies **http://mediatization.umcs.pl**
Data: 13/11/2026 07:25:24

nicative and reflexive way and are subject to social negotiation processes in which they are embedded and categorized socially.

Method: Case Study on German Retro Gamer

The design of the case study presented in the following on the game experiences and characteristics subjectively considered important by retro gamer ties in with the contextualizing perspective of the mediatization approach. The qualitative case study aims to empirically trace a contribution to this question using the particular example of the media culture of retro gaming. The phenomenon of retro gaming appears interesting against the background of the cognitive interest of this contribution, since it expresses a strong tendency towards the medial culture of memory, which – so the assumption – is an indication of institutionalization and reification processes of moulding forces of media (cf. section 3). Methodologically, the study is based on the qualitative approach of Grounded Theory.

The analysis is based on fourteen interviews with retro gamers aged between 23 and 42 in 2016/2017. The interview guide was elaborated on the basis of previous theoretical groundwork in the research field of retro gaming, which was condensed into four specific concepts: retro gaming as a form of media nostalgia (Felzmann, 2010), as a specific computer game culture (Wimmer, 2012), as a form of cultural asset, and as a legal and media-ethical problem area, since copyright holders no longer exist for a large number of games (Downing, 2011). The first field contact was the participation in a retro gaming event in a student club in Eastern Germany, where various game consoles from the years 1983–2006 were made available for use. The lively participation of the guests showed that there is great interest in this topic. Both older players who grew up with the games and a younger audience attended the event. Based on this, further respondents were recruited through a snowball system. In the sense of theoretical sampling, the origin, education and career choice (e.g. graphic design, software development, IT consulting and marketing) of the interviewees are as diverse as possible under the given contexts. Furthermore, the individual employment with retro games was emphasized on differences. Some interview partners write articles in Internet forums, produce so-called "walkthroughs" for video platforms or modify games. Collectors of games, game consoles or old computer technology are also among those surveyed. The fact that some of the players grew up in the GDR also provides additional insights into the process of media socialization. This procedure led to a rather heterogeneous sample, which represents the research field retro gaming very well considering research possibilities and the explorative interest of the study.

When surveying individual attitudes, behaviours and knowledge stocks, response biases may arise due to social desirability or opinion taboos. In order to relieve the respondents of their inhibitions in this respect, they were assured that the survey

Pobrane z czasopisma Mediatizations Studies **http://mediatization.umcs.pl**
Data: 13/11/2026 07:25:24

would be anonymous. For this purpose, they were assigned numbers that served to later allocate the statements during the research process. The coding of the interviews followed the non-standardised evaluation paradigm according to Anselm L. Strauss (1987) in three stages: open, axial and selective coding. In the open coding process, preliminary concepts were developed and labelled with appropriate categories. In some cases, descriptions were taken verbatim from the data material. In the second (axial) phase of interpretation, characteristic properties and related dimensions (computer game experiences, perceived moulding forces, media practices and context) were worked out for each category. The focus was on the systematic discovery of contrasts and similarities. The final selective coding aimed at developing a theory related to the subject matter. As outlined at the beginning, the question of the formative power of computer games and their connection with the socialization of gamers was the focus of the investigation from the outset, so that in this evaluation step, in contrast to the classical procedure of grounded theory, an attempt was made to develop a network of relationships consisting of core categories related to these two basic questions, which can explain the cases of contrast and similarities.

Results

The process of their computer game socialization as retro gamer reflected by respondents goes beyond the concept of identity (who am I?) and refers to elements of the subjectivation of media users (what does that do to me?). The findings show that retro gamers have had various experiences with computer games in the course of their biographies, which, from their point of view, have been particularly or not at all influential. Their reflected computer game socialization is based on specific moulding forces that refer to processes of institutionalization as well as reification – such as the perceived exclusivity of the game culture (aspect of institutionalization) or the individual possibilities of access to the medium of computer games and the technical systems required for it (aspects of reification). These, in turn, influence retro gamers in their experiences and dealings with games in the past as well as the present. This form of the socialization process is accompanied by specific media practices of the players.

Play Experiences from Childhood and Youth

In retrospect, the respondents always associate primary gaming experiences from their childhood or youth with their enthusiasm for computer games and their novelty, which was so memorable for them that they still have the feeling today of being able to reconstruct their feelings at that time exactly. Thus, a player tells exemplarily of his game beginnings:

Pobrane z czasopisma Mediatizations Studies **http://mediatization.umcs.pl**
Data: 13/11/2026 07:25:24

> Well, the first time I ever came into contact with games was at my grandfather's house, he had a little (...), something like a Gameboy, just more or less from Russian times. *Nu Pagadi* was the name of the game and it was about such a wolf who has to catch eggs that came down from above. That was something great, and whenever I see the game, I always have to think about my grandpa's big oak table. (Interview 4)

This finding confirms a thesis expressed by Sebastian Felzmann (2010) that within the framework of media nostalgia, the positive aspects of earlier gaming experiences that triggered media passion are usually only remembered selectively. The immersion into the experience world of a retro game works in this context like a kind of time tunnel, because it helps the player not only to remember the earlier times, but also to remember the feelings with which the first game experiences were connected. Surprisingly, the respondents did not report any disappointments when playing a game again, as Felzmann (2010) postulates. Dissatisfaction only manifests itself in their reference to current computer games, which are often rated more critically than the old ones (see next section).

Reconstructed Moments of Moulding Forces as a Mode of Nostalgic Subjectivation

The category game characteristics comprises the various features, some of which have already been postulated in previous research, which make up a retro game as an interactive media product and which refer to its materiality, such as specific gameplay, genre, aesthetics or narration (cf. Felzmann, 2010; Suominen, 2008). From the retro gamer's point of view, these features have a decisive influence on the gaming experience and thus also play a role in computer game socialization that should not be underestimated. The interviewees speak of a "special charm" of a game (Interviews 1 and 5) or of a greater "love of detail" (Interview 9). Most of them believe that their favourite retro games were more innovative than other computer games not only at the time of their release – e.g. at the level of game background history and gameplay: "Old games have a better history. The story in today's games is sometimes a bit simple, it's artificially pimped up to lengthen relatively simple facts" (Interview 3).

This rather transfiguring perspective can be explained by the fact that the computer games with which retro gamers were socialized at the time represented the state of the art in the field of entertainment communication or a mediatization boost that was associated with the enthusiasm of children and young people. The period from the end of the 1970s to the mid-1980s is described by observers as a kind of golden era of video games ("Videogame Craze") (see Kent, 2001 for details), since the games industry was strongly driven by innovation and computer games experienced their

Pobrane z czasopisma Mediatizations Studies **http://mediatization.umcs.pl**
Data: 13/11/2026 07:25:24

social breakthrough. Thus, the respondents' preference for a comparatively simple and abstract pixel graphic, one of the "trademarks" of the retro-genre (cf. Beil, 2013), also becomes comprehensible. Because it has its origin in the socialization with the aesthetics of games at that time, which were clearly limited from a technological point of view:

> Clearly it shapes you when you are socialized as a small button with something like that. For example, I still notice very clearly today that I can't do anything with these modern 3D games, that's somehow too overloaded for me. Well, I'd rather have it simple and clear somewhere and then I'd rather think a little bit about it or I'd rather have to try out some things several times until you finally get it right. (Interview 7)

The materiality of the computer games (including their packaging, instructions for use, additional material, etc.), which is considered to be extremely important in this context – not only for the reception at the time but also for the present reception – is also evident from the fact that the interviewees refer time and again to the same games, such as *Final Fantasy*, which are stylistically influencing for them (Interviews 3, 5 and 9, cf. in detail from a theoretical perspective Heineman, 2014). The players who become more and more familiar with each other in the course of their (media) biographies are again confronted with a surge in mediatization today, which is connected with a very complex computer game market, which is not only hard for them to grasp, but also makes it difficult for them to find new "good" games through a multitude of new editions:

> If you look at it that way today, I have the impression that people can't think of anything new, it's always just the remake of the next or the predecessor. It's all about higher resolution, even more colourful, even more great (...) and I find, but frankly, the actual game content suffers greatly from it. It actually distracts you way too much. (Interview 7).

In the past, the players experienced an important impact due to the access to computer games, which was sometimes rated as severely restricted: on the one hand, the variety of the games was experienced as low, on the other hand, the price of the games – as relatively high. Some players point out that they had only a few games to choose from at the time, often only those that came with the console and they tried to play them over and over again (Interview 12). It is also often admitted that in the past they have failed in many games due to a lack of interest in the technique, without this having a long-term effect on their passion for the game. Technical barriers such as long loading times, which seem unimaginable nowadays, could also put a strain on the player's patience: "I also had a jump-and-run game on my Atari, which loaded ten minutes per level. Of course, it can also pass you by, especially as a child without patience, which does the game quite a bit of a break" (Interview 1).

Pobrane z czasopisma Mediatizations Studies **http://mediatization.umcs.pl**
Data: 13/11/2026 07:25:24

In contrast to the past, language barriers increasingly play a role in access today. Retro gamers, for example, use online forums to find out about appearances in other countries. However, these publications are often only available in the national language, which leads to some complications:

> I also had a game that I never really understood and where I still don't really know how it works. The game was on a Japanese Game Boy cartridge and the instructions were also in Japanese. At some point I got it as a gift from an acquaintance who didn't get along with it and I still don't know exactly what to do in the game. So, if you can overcome the language barrier with English texts, then it would work, but this Japanese game is still a mystery to me today. (Interview 3)

What all these past and present barriers have in common is that they do not detract from the passion for computer games – quite the opposite. In general, it is also true that the perception of access is strongly subjective, as the various players often perceive it differently. So what is an obstacle for one player is a welcome challenge for the other: "I never had to struggle with barriers because I loved these computer games and it never felt like a barrier to me" (Interview 1).

Interestingly, the popular titles of the time are not necessarily regarded as "cult games". Rather, computer games that were less accessible at the time or never appeared on the European market are also interesting today. In this case, emulators or commercial gaming platforms on the Internet offer the opportunity – rated as very positive by almost all respondents – to play games that were previously inaccessible, at least in the present. Some respondents even see this virtual archiving as a way to preserve computer games as a cultural heritage.

At the same time, however, the structural barriers to access to the medium of computer games outlined above also promote a self-conception associated with differentiation from other computer gamers. This also refers to playing characteristics: In the past, when a player was able to overcome the obstacles that a difficult game presented him with, he felt that he belonged to a special group of people – a feeling that many retro gamers still consider important today, and which is emphasized in some interviews:

> When there were puzzles to solve, in the past you sometimes sat down in pairs for a week and watched how the game went on. The players nowadays mostly look at Google and can then continue playing. The ambition of today's players gets lost in this tidal wave of games that you just have at your disposal. (Interview 5)

Through their specific playing habits and attitude to the game, but also through the subcultural character of the retro-scene, some gamers still distinguish themselves from the broad mass of computer gamers even today. Thus, they are of the opinion that with the current variety of computer games and the possibility of getting them

Pobrane z czasopisma Mediatizations Studies **http://mediatization.umcs.pl**
Data: 13/11/2026 07:25:24

relatively cheaply or even for free, many players tend to "test" games on their own (Interview 8).

The interviewees articulate their identity as players throughout also in relation to the commercial context of the gaming industry (cf. from a theoretical perspective: Heineman, 2014), but partly quite differently and depending on the life situation of the interviewees: computer games are sometimes perceived as very expensive earlier (Interview 12), sometimes, at present (Interview 11). In all interviews, however, it becomes clear that the current popularity and marketing of retro games is a sensitive topic for them. Retro gamers are enthusiastic about the fact that the classic games are now relatively easily available. However, the way in which this is done is considered critical. Some respondents have the impression that they are only trying to generate sales with products that would be cheaper or free to buy:

> You can no longer milk a cow if it is actually almost dead. So, I also inquired about the old games: Many are still offered for a lot of money nowadays. Partly even for the original price of 1992 converted one to one in Euro. I'm telling you; you shouldn't do that. (Interview 4)

In addition, some consider the orientation of the current gaming industry as very negative:

> Because it's all about earning money. Maybe there will be some projects for lovers, where people will sit down and do something neat and tedious. But in general, gaming industry is disposable industry. You can see from all the games: 10 hours of fun, and that's it and you're done with that and there are no new levels either. Or you have to pay for new levels (...) So what I've played in new games, played through, thrown away. (Interview 11)

The critical basic attitude towards commerce is apparently lifted by a form of fear of loss, as some game titles are not available indefinitely. This is mainly due to the half-life of game devices and the media on which the game software is stored. In the 1990s, many retro games were published for the PC or currently on the Internet. Nevertheless, some respondents feel that games where this is not the case lose a lot of important content (Interviews 8 and 9). This loss, which a player rated as "blood-letting" (Interview 7), increases the players' appreciation of retro games. It also raises questions with them about how the "cultural heritage" of the games can be preserved (Interview 14). One interviewee (13) admits that some games may also be preserved by parents who have grown up with these games getting their children enthusiastic about them. From the point of view of some respondents, the desire to preserve the gaming culture is largely due to their special relationship to games. Outside their community, according to widespread opinion, there will only be a few players who deal with games in this form, which is indirectly also an indication of the need for demarcation of retro gamers.

Pobrane z czasopisma Mediatizations Studies **http://mediatization.umcs.pl**
Data: 13/11/2026 07:25:24

Media Practices of Retro Gaming

Retro-gamer practices at the level of appropriation include specific playing habits. This category refers to the individual handling of the games, which has changed expectably over time or at least is perceived differently. Some respondents feel that they used to be more "persistent" when playing: "Stamina is something you lose very quickly in today's games. In retro games, on the other hand, you wanted to play through the games simply because you didn't have so many games to choose from" (Interview 3).

As a typical expression of playing habits, the replay of games from childhood can be differentiated. However, it also happens that retro gamers have the need to "catch up" with a gaming experience (Interview 3), if they were unable to do so in their childhood or youth or did not know the game at all. The game as a social event with friends is particularly important for retro gamers (Interview 9). In the interviewees' retrospective, it was usually the case that several players gathered before a game, played only one at a time and watched the others (Interview 2). Thus, the early gaming experiences that retro gamers remember were also often events with strong social connotations. This context can be attributed, among other things, to the fact that the game systems were relatively expensive at the time and not every young person had a console and the corresponding games.

As theoretically postulated at the beginning, computer games as media artefacts are often of high emotional value for the players because they are linked to personal memories. This appreciation is expressed exemplarily in the collection and storage of games and game-related hardware. An interviewee compares this practice to collecting books:

> I collect games, (...) some people have a bookshelf, and I have games on the shelf as well. There are also some, I won't play them again, but it looks very nice in the closet wall and yes it has a certain nostalgic personal value if you have had that and played earlier, and I also think that's good to pick it up. I mean, there were a lot of people who put a lot of work into it, and that's something you can appreciate, even later. (Interview 14)

Further interview passages show that downloading digital copies is by no means a sign of a lack of esteem for retro games, but quite the opposite, from their point of view, rather a sign of a strong interest in games.

Media practices at the level of production include the exchange of genre knowledge and games, the development of emulators as well as the modification of retro games. In addition to written reviews and field reports, which are published on the Internet, another form of the mediatized game report is currently very popular among the interviewees, namely filming and commenting on a game while it is being played (so-called Let's Play) (cf. in detail Ackermann, 2016). A retro gamer, who generates and

Pobrane z czasopisma Mediatizations Studies **http://mediatization.umcs.pl**
Data: 13/11/2026 07:25:24

provides amateur-like game contributions for the online platform YouTube himself, describes his experiences:

> I have several friends who really watch the retro games more than all the newer stuff, because they might not have the nerve to play it again themselves or because they just enjoy it and also like to see how it puts me out when I can't get it right again. (Interview 13)

Both in the past and today, however, not only information about games is exchanged, but above all, the games themselves. It is possible to differentiate the ways in which exchanges take place and the number of computer games. In the past, it was often exchanged and copied among friends and acquaintances in the schoolyard or by post (Interviews 3 and 7). Even today, retro gamers personally exchange games with their friends – but increasingly on online file-sharing sites, which raises copyright issues even more than in the past.

In the past, players experimented with the modification of computer games (so-called mods). It was about testing your own abilities and making small changes in the gameplay or on the display level as well as fixing bugs: "It's about (...) as generally in the Open Source area also about the fact that you simply want to do more bit by bit than what any manufacturer intended. It might start with things as small as building levels yourself to implementing new logics in the game" (Interview 7).

Today, the focus is more on programming emulators to play old games on new platforms. Interestingly, these efforts here are not focused solely on computer games in a narrower sense than software, but are also linked to retro-hardware and entertainment technologies in a broader sense.

Conclusions

The categories developed from the interviews illustrate important connections with regard to the individual reflection of media socialization processes, which, in turn, can be understood as a specific process of subjectivation. The computer game socialization of retro gamers takes its starting point from the gaming experiences of childhood and youth. In the further course, however, from the perspective of the gamers, different influencing forces in different contexts exert varying degrees of influence on them and their becoming subjects as retro gamers. The subcultural atmosphere of the early computer game culture, in which most retro gamers were socialized, represents a strongly perceived influence. This feeling of having had a special part in something, still makes her like to return to her roots or feel the urge to experience classic game contexts anew, but it also promotes a need for demarcation, especially in relation to younger computer gamers. The socialization process is accompanied by media practices at the appropriation level such as collecting retro-related game artefacts as well

Pobrane z czasopisma Mediatizations Studies **http://mediatization.umcs.pl**
Data: 13/11/2026 07:25:24

as at the production level such as making digital copies of old games and distributing them on the net. Many of these actions keep computer games, which are perceived as cultural assets, alive, but on the other hand, they are not socially controversial among the interviewees because they raise copyright issues. Here there are some overlaps with other Internet subcultures such as the cracker scene.

At first glance, the generalisability of many of the findings must be limited to a not inconsiderable extent and can be attributed to this fact in particular, that in the study a limited selection of confessing retro gamers and not casual players had its say. Also, quite a few statements of the interviewees, e.g. regarding the perceived "exclusiveness" of the subculture, are to be evaluated rather as nice memories or even as marginal notes. Nevertheless, the experiences and memories expressed are analytically important as they have shaped the respondents, at least from their point of view. Computer games are very consciously consumed by the interviewees and – influenced by media usage practices and media cultural contexts – they are an important component of their self-reflexive and recursive and thus mediatized identity as gamers. However, many games from that time are still considered classics today and are still played in urban areas. An impressive example of social popularity can be found in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2010) and its movie adaptation by Steven Spielberg (2017). Nevertheless, the results also show some parallels to the results of traditional media socialization research. For example, the (then) difficult access to computer games played a major role in the emergence of the medium's great power of fascination.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the empirical basis of the media socialization model presented here refers solely to the subjectively remembered experiences and memories of gamers articulated in the interview, who do not always clearly differentiate between lived and experienced practices and media experiences in a sharp and detailed manner. Strictly speaking, it provides information on two dimensions of subjectivation processes: on the one hand, on the reflection of how to deal with computer games and thus subjectivation through games and game contexts, and on the other hand, on remembering games and game contexts, which are to be analytically separated from the first dimension.

For reasons of complexity, only one aspect of the interviewees' media socialization – the importance of computer games – was focused in this case study. The media repertoires of computer gamers are in themselves broader and more complex, "not only one media »moulds« the communicative construction of reality, but a variety of different media do so at the same time" (Hepp, 2013b, p. 8). It remains to be reconstructed empirically from the interaction of the various communication media in the process of media socialization. However, the analytical reference to the concept of malleability helps to determine more precisely the interdependence of media and biography in the context of media socialization. It can be a small building block for advancing the interlocking of socialization and societal theories, as called for by Krotz (2013), precisely in consideration of their subject dimension.

Pobrane z czasopisma Mediatizations Studies **http://mediatization.umcs.pl**
Data: 13/11/2026 07:25:24

Surprisingly, the findings show great similarities between the individual points of view. The memory performance expressed in the interviews thus goes beyond the purely "individual" and is possibly a reference to the group-related constructional performance of media communication within the framework of the media culture examined here as an example – a finding that speaks for a relatively homogeneous media (sub)culture of retro gamers and their perception of formative elements of computer games both then and now. The nostalgic view of the interviewees from the present on past media use interlocks both temporal epochs, past and present media socialization and the individual reflection and subjectivation associated with it. It leaves thereby – at least with the questioned retro gamers – little free space for change and even innovation, apart from the digital practices of archiving and passing on. On the one hand, the players are very satisfied with their past and present media practices, and on the other hand, they appear to be firmly established in the training of a player subject. This form of recursiveness is also a central feature of current mediatization processes and its subject-related significance (cf. Krotz, 2017b, p. 8f).

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Data: 13/11/2026 07:25:24

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