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Playing Out of Bounds?

Cross-Platform Community Practice in and Beyond *Dark Souls*[*]

Contemporary community practices in digital space

Playing videogames was never only about reacting to what happens on the screen. It has always also been about sharing experiences. And, it has always also been about finding playful ways of extending one's experience both within and beyond the confines of a particular game. Inventing new rules and playing differently is as much part of that as interacting and communicating with others about a game, and through a game. By engaging in such practices of play in a broad sense, the players create common ground, common experiences and perceptions. Such activities frequently result in the emergence of communities of practice, characterized by an informal but structured exchange, focused on generating novel knowledge and opportunities to act, and held together by a reflexive interpretation of their own practice (Stalder 2016, 136). In contrast to formal communities, which are based on statutes and documented membership, these communities are established and held together through their practices, which are continuously subjected to reflexive interpretation, meaning "establishing, preserving and transforming the interpretive framework that lends actions, processes and objects their meaning and authority" (Ibid.).[1] In this

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[*] This chapter builds on and develops our previous research (Mühleder, Becker, and Roth 2019). Some of the data used hereafter has been gathered with the help of Wanting Chen and Shunsuke Mukae. Your help is highly appreciated. We would also like to thank our reviewers for their important comments and critique.

[1] In an early theoretical conception, Tönnies (1991 [1887]) pitted the strong ties of community against the non-binding, weak ties of society, thus deploying community as a critique of modernization and urban life. In the second half of the 20th century, sociologists have identified a shift from such binding communities to less binding, temporary, "post-traditional communities," "tribes," or "scenes" (Hitzler, Honer and Pfadenhauer 2008, 12–18; Hitzler, Bucher and Niederbacher 2005; Hitzler and Pfadenhauer 2007).

chapter, we explore the common practices emerging from the widely popular videogame series *Dark Souls*, developed by Japanese company FromSoftware from 2011 to 2016. Analysing how player practices in and outside of the *Dark Souls* game worlds define and renegotiate commonality, we show that *Dark Souls* provides opportunities for finding common ground on multiple levels. These practices not only connect, but also divide the playership internally. Furthermore, they establish links to other, non-gaming contexts through their dissemination on different media platforms, such as YouTube and Twitch.tv.[2] Tracing some of these trends, the chapter suggests that *Dark Souls* does not give rise to one community of practice, but rather involves a process of internal stratification and fragmentation, while also remixing game-related practices with other domains.

Insofar as they take place most centrally in digital space, such negotiations and dynamics are also framed by technical affordances and mechanisms of control and exploitation (Dean 2005; Ōtsuka 2016; Srnicek 2017; Stalder 2016; Steinberg 2019). An analysis of the ways in which common practices in digital space establish and negotiate internal and external boundaries requires us to take the constitutive force of such technologies into account. It also demands consideration for how language boundaries and other factors weigh in. Focusing on the English- and the Japanese language spaces, we specifically consider the extent to which languages factor into the emergence of commonality in social media practices among players.

We chose the *Dark Souls* series in order to explore these questions for two reasons. First, it serves as a prime example of the control mechanisms in place on contemporary platforms and in societies of control more generally, as the games offer a strictly confined and regulated space for the player to freely engage with (Galloway 2008; Roth 2017). The *Dark Souls* games provide a more or less open world to interact with, but one in which communication affordances between players are strictly limited. As our analysis shows, the players have reacted to this situation both in and outside of the game with a wide range of common practices, in Stalder's sense, in particular via various types of memes that consolidate and distinguish communities within the playership. In doing so, they play beyond the game worlds' bounds, only to establish new boundaries.

Second, the *Dark Souls* series serves as an exemplary showcase of cross-platform practices. The difficulty and wide range of possible engagements

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2 In recent years, practices like live streaming (especially on Twitch.tv) have become an important part of the political economy of the video game world (Johnson/Woodcock 2019)

have prompted vivid community practices, in particular on the video sharing platform YouTube and the streaming platform Twitch.tv. The documents of common practice available there serve as central data for our research, and provide a starting point for considering communities of practice across platforms. Insofar as they provide technologically framed spaces and facilitate communication in a wide range of languages, they also offer an opportunity to observe language-specific practices and cross-lingual interaction.

Our analysis leans heavily on tools developed as part of the project "Database Infrastructure for Global Game Culture Research" (2017–2021). In particular, we created two YouTube datasets, containing video metadata and user comments from YouTube for English and Japanese gaming channels featuring *Dark Souls* content. These large-scale datasets provide us with the possibility to make empirical observations about communicative practices and their user structures in relation to *Dark Souls* games using open-source data analysis and visualization tools.[3] In order to show how common referential practices are both framed by platforms and take shape across them, we focus on "memetic" practices, which Shifman (2021, 190) defines as "the act of participation through mimesis […]. It captures a wide range of communicative intentions and actions, spanning all the way from naive copying to scornful imitation."

Section two shows how such memetic practices emerge from the *Dark Souls* game world around emblematic phrases like "Praise the Sun" and section three focuses on a meme that appeared within the context of YouTube's remix culture: "Giant Dad." Following this, section four considers how language barriers intersect with community practices, using the Japanese language space as an example. The conclusion summarizes our findings and discusses potential avenues for future research. We discuss how practices generate commonality across platforms and, more importantly, across cultural domains. Examining the game-like chat communications accompanying a hearing in the US Congress, streamed on Twitch.tv., we find an indication that communication follows a similar grammar to that found in the gaming cultural communication practices that served to establish the *Dark Souls* communities of practice. Control mechanisms are not at the centre of our analysis but they serve as important context in this particular section, which draws attention to the platforms themselves, as well as their underlying economic structures.

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3   The data mining tool pyg (https://github.com/diggr/pyg) was used for the creation of the datasets; Gephi (https://gephi.org/) and Kibana (https://www.elastic.co/kibana) were used for data analysis and visualization.

"Praise the sun": The emergence of memetic community practices

The *Dark Souls* game worlds offers a wide range of, albeit strictly limited contents and communicative practices that have given rise to a distinct culture of communication and identification. One prominent feature is the so-called Orange soapstone messages: By using specific items, players can leave graffiti-like messages within the game world. Players are not free to formulate any message, they can arrange sentences from a set of pre-arranged words and phrases (see Fig. 1). By using online features, these messages then show up in other players' sessions, who can then "rate" these messages (similar to "likes/dislikes" on social media posts). This generated many creative ways of using these messages: silly jokes; helping other players (warning them about ambushes, pointing to hidden doorways and items); tricking them; or warning them about messages trying to trick them, and so on.

From this, emerged a series of widely recognized, emblematic phrases and related memetic practices in the game itself as well as on various social media and broadcasting platforms, which have contributed significantly to the formation of communities of practice.

The most widely recognized catchphrase in the *Dark Souls* world is "Praise the Sun," spoken by the non-player character Solaire of Astora in a dialogue with the player in the first installment of the series, in combination with an iconic gesture, which sees Solaire raise both arms up to create a V-shape above his head. Later in the game, players can learn the gesture and perform it at will. As Fig. 1 shows, the phrase is also available to the player in the messaging system.

Neither the gesture, nor the phrase have any significant meaning related to the gameplay, other than referring to the religious beliefs of Solaire and the respective cult of the sun. As Morton puts it, "Praise the Sun" receives its meaning from common practice:

> The beauty of praising the sun is that it has no baked-in meaning. Waving and bowing and pointing all have obvious uses based on real-world application. [...] Praising the sun was an opportunity for players to place their own meaning on the game world, rather than continue to excavate its vague item descriptions and cryptic cut scenes for scraps of information. [...] So with Solaire as their inspiration, everyone came to a collective, gradual decision on the meaning of praising the sun. It would be a sign of joy, hope, and jolly cooperation. (Morton 2017)

In other words, "Praise the sun" has been imbued with meaning for the community due to reflexive interpretive practices: it has come to serve as a

Figure 1. The "Orange Soapstone" messaging system in *Dark Souls 1*.

reference to the games, and, at the same time, it provides a way of identifying the subject voicing or enacting it as part of said community. This symbolic character has presumably developed gradually. Inside the game, players can enact its gesture in multiplayer games to communicate with others, or leave a "Praise the Sun" message on the ground for others to find. Beyond the game, the phrase and gesture have come to be used as a symbol of joy, and as a greeting. In this sense, "Praise the Sun" is not so much a phrase used for its communicative content, but rather for its function of signalling belonging to a vaguely defined community of practice engaging with *Dark Souls*.

Using a dataset of *Dark Souls* peer-to-peer network traffic,[4] we have mapped a large number of messages onto the game world. Filtering out the "Praise the Sun" messages shows that many players have reaffirmed the relevance of the moment at which Solaire of Astora is introduced to the player by echoing his praise with their messages in his vicinity ([Fig. 2](#)).

The bird's-eye view on the map suggests that turning "Praise the Sun" into a symbolic reference to the game has been a crowd effort. An effort, we would add, without which neither Solaire, nor his phrase and gesture would have gained significant relevance in relation to any community of practice. In other words, it serves to establish and uphold the interpretive framework of *Dark Souls* players, to the point that it turns into a ritualistic practice that marks
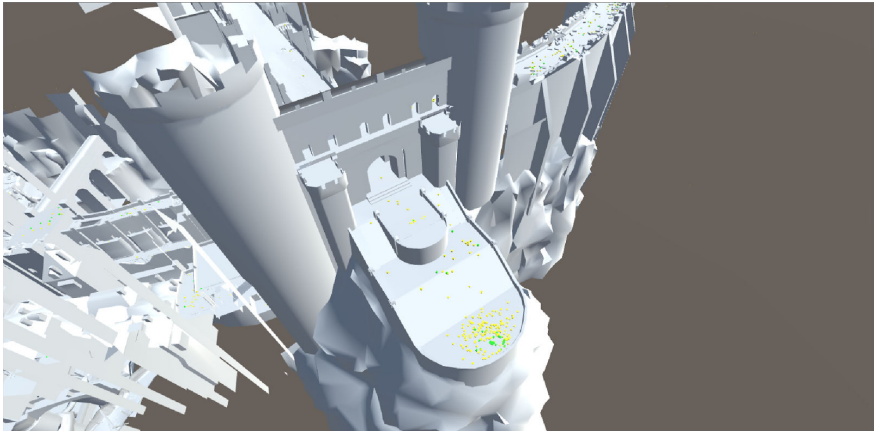
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4   https://github.com/pawREP/Dark-Souls-1-P2P-Data

Figure 2. 3D Visualization of "Orange Soapstone" player messages at the scene of the first meeting with Solaire. Yellow dots represent "Praise the Sun" messages, green dots other messages.
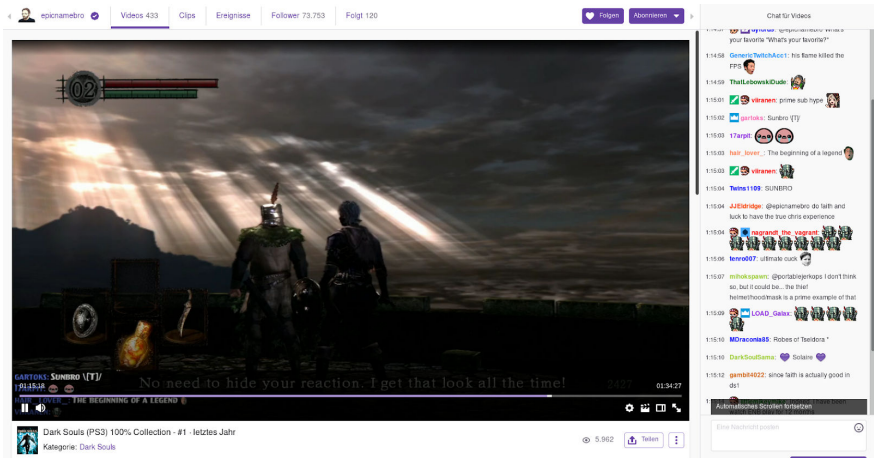

Figure 3. Streamer "epicnamebro" meets Solaire of Astora in a *Dark Souls* playthrough.

belonging to a *Souls*-related community of practice, as the following example shows (Fig. 3).

In Twitch streams, during specific moments of the playthrough, the viewers flood the Live-Chat with "Praise the Sun" emoticons (usually depicting a character in the distinct pose of the "Praise the Sun" gesture). This happens during story moments as described above, but also at moments when the streamer "meets" other players in multiplayer. In other words, "Praise the Sun" not only acts as a reference to a specific moment in the *Dark Souls* series, but its usage also indicates that many players are aware of its relevance for the game.

As such, the phrase has become part of the repertoire of a broadly defined community of practice emerging from *Dark Souls*. Considering its popularity and introduction at a non-optional waypoint in the game, "Praise the Sun" serves as a low-barrier reference to the games, widely known by players. For Stalder, referencing, in a broad sense of the word, is a "method by which individuals inscribe themselves in cultural processes" (Stalder 2016, 95, our translation), and by which meanings are continuously affirmed (Ibid., 128). "Praise the Sun" is a prime example of how particular, emblematic phrases and gestures can signal common ground: referencing them serves as an access token to a vaguely defined community of practice somehow connected to the *Dark Souls* series.

Such referencing not only takes place in the game worlds, but also in other digital spaces. The *Souls* series has sparked vivid video recording and streaming activities. This is partly due to the difficulty of the games, partly due to their variability, and partly due to their player-versus-player capabilities, which have turned playing into a stage for many capable players. "Praise the Sun" has been transposed and adapted to the textual communication channels accompanying the respective video sharing and streaming platforms. Analysing the communications about the *Souls* series related to popular YouTube and Twitch channels, we were able to trace a temporal evolution of different versions of the "Praise the Sun" gesture in the YouTube comment section and the Twitch chat (Fig. 4).

These changes also contribute to the memetic status of the gesture. In relation to online media, the term "meme" is broadly used to describe "shared in-jokes, catchphrases, idiosyncratic habits, and of course participants' tendency to caption countless pictures of cats" (Phillips and Milner 2017). For our purposes, we follow Shifman's (2014b, 41) definition of memes as, "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users."

Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017, 484) argue that memes can contribute to separating communities and provide for internal distinctions. They mark subcultural knowledge and serve as gatekeepers for communities, distinguishing between the "in-group" and "passer's-by" (Ibid., 485), sending a "constant signal of belonging" (Ibid., 498). As "instable equilibria," they provide a space for established and new knowledge to merge (Ibid., 494–498). In other words, they offer both spaces in which meanings can gradually evolve, and spaces in which they can be combined with other meanings.

"Praise the Sun" is a clear example of such gatekeeping and identification function of memes. Whilst partly an affective act, players use the phrase and gesture (including the various versions of its emoticon), consciously in order to mutually affirm their in-group status. As a commenter on YouTube puts it:

Figure 4. "Praise the Sun" emojis in YouTube comments.

> I think it'd be awesome if we all did this... In honor of Solaire of Astora and supporting the theory that Solaire is one of the children of Gwyn, I will lay a "Praise the Sun!" message in front of the pedestal where his statue once stood, in the room where you fought Ornstein & Smough. What say you, Sunbros?
> (Wijmer – "Dark Souls Story ▸ Solaire and the Sun." (VaatiVidya), 27 March 2013)

"Praise the Sun," both as phrase and gesture, has developed from a reference to a specific moment in the *Souls* series, into a reference for the game series and a somewhat vaguely defined community of players and other members interested in the games. This "evolution" has been induced by common practices both inside and beyond the game worlds. As such, "Praise the Sun" is not necessarily tied to its origin anymore – constantly reflected on and reinvented, the (ritualized) practice of referencing it serves to signal and mutually reaffirm the players' common affiliation. While it references a particular moment in the game or a choice players make for a particular in-game religion, the phrase has gained more significance as an omnipresent reference to the *Souls* series and its game worlds, as well as a broadly defined community of practice emerging

from them. We would even speculate that "Praise the Sun" may have entered the canon of references to a wider community attached to gaming culture, turning those in the know (even if only vaguely) into the in-group.

Remixing community practices across media and platforms: "Giant Dad"

Other *Souls* memes are less inclusive and, at the same time, more strongly interlinked with other media cultures. "Giant Dad" is an example of a meme that functions to distinguish a particular group from the wider *Souls*-related community. It is also an example of how memes are spaces in which new meanings are created by combining different elements that are not necessarily of the same domain, and are shaped by media platform affordances.

The "Giant Dad" (aka "The Legend") is a character build[5] that has gained recognition due to its superiority over other builds at an early stage of character development in *Dark Souls*. It was specifically used for player-versus-player matches and named "Giant Dad" for its ingredients, the "Giant Armor" and the "Mask of the Father." Just like Solaire of Astora, "Giant Dad" is often accompanied with a specific in-game gesture ("Well! This is it"). Incidentally, this gesture is frequently used to mock the defeated opponent in player-versus-player matches.

The "Giant Dad" character build gave rise to one of the most widely advanced *Souls* memes. Its popularity can be traced to the YouTube video "HE'S BACK" on the OnlyAfro channel (2012). It is by far the most viewed video in our dataset, with approximately 6.5 million views. Other videos about "Giant Dad," such as "Dark Souls: How to make Giantdad" (ymfah, 2018) and "The Legend – Dark Souls Lore: Giant Dad" (DaveControl, 2014) rank high in terms of views in our dataset.[6] Whereas "Praise the Sun" emerged from a predefined part of the storyworld, "Giant Dad" originates in player-based creativity targeting both the functional and the aesthetic dimension of character builds. However, the memetic practice related to the "Giant Dad" only emerged through common practices outside of the game, most prominently on YouTube. Unlike "Praise the Sun," the "Giant Dad" is not a mandatory element of the *Souls* worlds and, as such, has not become part of broader *Souls* community

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5 The term character build refers to a specific way of developing ones role playing game character (character attributes, armor, weaponry, etc.)

6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQD_QoZt-AY; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWPM5k_yYy8.

knowledge. The group of players actively perpetuating it is rather limited to those with the respective experience, knowledge, and player-versus-player inclinations. In other words, the meme is at the centre of its own sub-community within the common *Souls* space.

YouTube allows us to trace the emergence of the meme. Following the publication by OnlyAfro (2012), the "Giant Dad" theme was only briefly confined to this channel. Beginning in March 2013, comments on other channels started to refer to it. Initially, these comments were still limited to the domain of player-versus-player-content focused channels, but by mid-2013, they were regularly appearing on other channels (focusing more on narrative elements and "lore"[7]), where the meme was met with puzzlement:

> What's a giant dad? All i could find is that it's a PVP build. There can't be any lore behind that, can there?
> (theGreenaffect – Comment on "Dark Souls Story ‣ Shiva the Traitor" (VaatiVidya), 22.07.2013)

> Can you please explain what giant dad is, I've beaten the game several times and im [sic] interested in the lore but I've only heard of it once
> (Moplonn – Comment on "Dark Souls Story ‣ Shiva the Traitor" (VaatiVidya), 22.07.2013)

Whereas some commentators reacted by explaining the origin of the meme, others started inventing lore about "Giant Dad" themselves:

> A mysterious knight in Golden Armor, hiding its true face behind an enchanted mask, the Giant-Dad stalks Lordran, destroying all that dare to cross its unique greatsword; the Bass-Cannon. An immortal specimen, many thought of imitating its fighting style, only to be put in their place by superior warriors. Those that know the truth of its origins realize that it is the creation of a God-like schoolgirl, content with the fact that the Giant-Dad will persist and live on. (I'm not as good as Vaati)
> (Demegamachete – Comment on "Dark Souls Story ‣ Shiva the Traitor" (VaatiVidya), 23.07.2013)

The latter points to the ironic and reflexive engagement with lore about the *Souls* worlds on YouTube. Demegamachete's comment can be read as an ironic response to VaatiVidya's lore-related video content. In this playful interaction, the "in-group" is aware of the construction of stories about *Dark Souls* in Vaati-

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7 In gaming, "lore" refers to a body of knowledge about specific game worlds, their history, characters and events. This knowledge can be presented inside the game (story sequences, item descriptions, …) as well as outside the game (supplemental media such as Comic books, novels, artbooks, …).

Vidya's videos, and they take pleasure in using this expert status to actively blur the lines between game-related facts and their own speculation or fictions. In August 2014, EpicNameBro published the video "The Legend – Dark Souls Lore: Giant Dad," which follows the general pattern of lore introductions and treats the "Giant Dad" as if he was a character in the game. Once again, the meta-level of the discourse is only accessible to those in the know.

Shifman (2014a, 344) calls such ironic and reflexive communication practices "hypersignification": "the code itself was no longer concealed, but was turned itself into a sign. [...Memes] are more about the process of meaning-making than about meaning itself." The "Giant Dad" lore discourse is a prime example of this tendency, while also showing the function it has for dividing in-group and out-group, thus introducing a further distinction within the more vaguely defined *Souls* community.

However, the "Giant Dad" is not simply a specialization from within a broader community – it also emerges from a remix of cultural elements and practices unrelated to the *Souls* games. The original video by OnlyAfro itself is an example of what Shifman (2012, 190) calls a memetic video, meaning "a popular clip that lures extensive creative user engagement in the form of parody, pastiche, mash-ups or other derivative work."

We were able to find eleven videos that remix form and content of the original video, sometimes adapting it to other games. While most of these adaptations focuses on titles in the *Souls* series (*Dark Souls III, Dark Souls Remastered* (QLOC und Virtuous 2018), there are also adaptations featuring the historical action game *For Honor* (Ubisoft Montreal et al. 2017). In each case, the characteristic elements of the original (cut, music, voice, use of other memes) are central to the adaptation, whereas the original intention of portraying character-build information and the "ingredients" of the build are adapted to the respective game context. Furthermore, the music used in the original video – the dubstep track "Excision & Downlink – Existence VIP" – has become integral to the meme, to the extent that it is imitated/adapted to text in the comments section:

> Filthy Casual! GiantDad will ANNIHILATE you with his +5 Bass Cannon for liking that SCRUBBY CRAP! Initiate Phase 1! Power Up the Bass Cannon… …fire! TXZTUPFUGIRSDTRSTDYRSTTDRSTDPTIRSTDRZSRST-ZIGIFZXGIPZIFOFXGIXPFPUXXITURZITSTDRZRURZUPYZROOZRSROS-RYFZXTYFXUCUimJustKiddingDZYDYOFOYXD Y REI
> (Fadedgogeta – Comment on "How we were lied to about Dark Souls 2" (Fungo), 04.08.2015)

Practices of referencing or adapting the "Giant Dad" meme thus serve as an internal distinction "within" the broader, more vaguely defined *Dark Souls*

community of practice, but they also extend the space of reference beyond a particular game universe and, arguably beyond gaming cultural contexts. By engaging in such practices, players involve themselves with a variety of communities of practice, shaped by the media platforms they are embedded in.

Community practices and language barriers

In the previous section, we showed how memetic practices emerged from gameplay mechanisms and were reproduced, amplified, or adapted across various media and platforms. We have considered some of the ways in which these practices contribute to establishing common ground and result in various common practices and, arguably, communities of practice. So far, our exploration has been limited to English-language documents on YouTube and Twitch.tv. But are these common practices persistent across language spaces? Do communities of practice transgress language boundaries? Given that any language space – and the English language space in particular – may be open to a wide range of speakers and actors from various places and backgrounds, it seems problematic to treat different language spaces on equal ground. We should at least expect a much wider range of participants in the English language space, including Japanese native speakers. At the same time, it seems likely that the Japanese language space is the main space for engaging with *Dark Souls* online for many Japanese native speakers. If that is the case, our question is whether we find similar common practices there, and how easily memes can transgress language barriers.

While Twitch.tv is not (yet) as prominent in the Japanese language space, YouTube has become an important digital platform for game cultural practices. To take a closer look, we have extracted the comments from twelve prominent YouTube channels producing content about the *Souls* series. Their viewer counts cannot be compared to those of the English-language cases, but are nonetheless significant (Tables 1 and 2).

Analysing the commenting behaviour of the users in the dataset shows that there is hardly any overlap (< 0.1 per cent) between the users of the Japanese- and English-language channels. Figure 5 visualizes the result as a network, clearly showing the two groups of YouTube channels divided in their language spaces. The possibility that users operate under different names in each language space notwithstanding, the data suggest that most of them do not actively participate in the discussions in both languages. This makes it less likely for a memetic practice emerging from one of the language spaces and travelling to the other language space.

Table 1. Five prominent YouTube channels in the English-language dataset.

Channel	Subscribers	Videos	Total views	Comments	Commenters
VaatiVidya	1,680,000	280	329,261,217	689,144	237,797
Prod	360,000	3219	158,361,704	428,003	98,533
Fighter .PL	409,000	2189	144,296,995	468,468	112,264
LobosJR	366,000	2881	144,582,631	236,417	67,065
SunlightBlade	576,000	215	134,792,495	198,022	88,816

Table 2. Five prominent YouTube channels in the Japanese-language dataset.

Channel	Subscribers	Videos	Total views	Comments	Commenters
BOW TAIJIN	27,300	177	12,568,509	19,477	4,741
愛の戦士チャンネル	237,000	2591	144,443,047	181,324	43,310
上級騎士なるにぃ	275,000	189	68,309,834	73,845	24,801
フジマロのゲーム部屋	15,700	4509	17,635,651	6085	1855
ふぅ	200,000	561	79,644,479	69,838	17,704

Table 3. Mentions of "Praise the Sun" in YouTube comments.

Mentions per 1000 comments	
Japanese-speaking channels: "太陽万歳"	English-speaking channels: "Praise the sun"
0.24	1.79
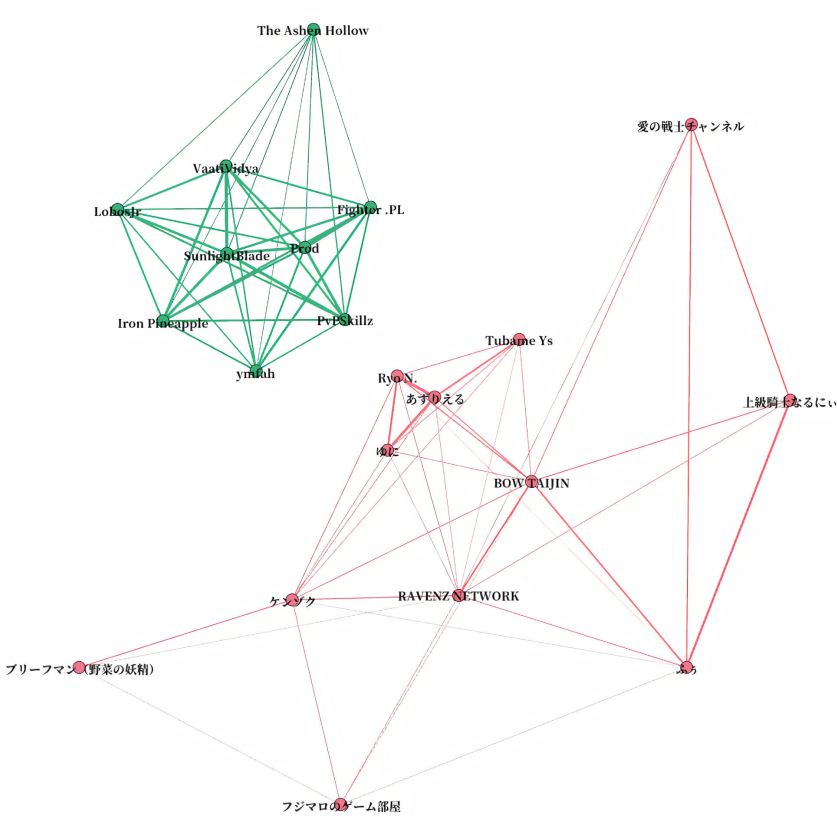
Figure 5. Network visualization of English (green) and Japanese (magenta) YouTube channels[8]

With that in mind, how does the interaction within each language space compare? As the discussion about the "Giant Dad" meme in the previous section showed, there is no single community of practice around *Dark Souls*. However, while such memes indicate differentiation within the more vaguely defined community, an analysis of user participation between (English-speaking) YouTube channels shows that there is a large overlap between the channels' userbases, likely aiding the spread of said meme. Judging from the Japanese channels sampled in our dataset, the chance of memes "travelling" within the Japanese-language channels appears to be much lower: the Japanese You-Tube space is characterized by considerably less cross-channel participation, even if we take the different scale of participants and interactions into account.

In terms of memetic content, the Japanese-language YouTube comments are also substantially different from the English language space considered above. Among the roughly 370,000 comments we gathered in the first exploratory data collection, we could hardly find evidence for a Japanese-language version of the "Praise the Sun" meme, not to mention "Giant Dad." While several instances of Ascii art and emoticons referencing "Praise the Sun" could be identified, the numbers are not comparable to the intensity with which the meme is referenced in the English language space (Table 3).

In the absence of the English phrase "Praise the Sun" from the comments in the Japanese-language dataset, it seems plausible to assume that the "Praise the Sun" meme is considerably less important (if present at all) within the Japanese language space. Another phrase similar to "Praise the Sun" - 太陽あれ！("Long may the sun shine!" in the English subtitles) – appears far more frequently in the Japanese comments (0.89 mentions per 1000 comments). This phrase was uttered in *Dark Souls III*, by the non-playable character Siegward of Catarina.[9]

As such, the "Sun" references in the Japanese language space are based on a different shared experience, which unfolds much less in relation to memetic practices. For example, it lacks a visual representation (gesture). Furthermore, most mentions of 太陽あれ！(77 per cent) appeared within the comments of a single channel, while the "Praise the Sun" mentions in the English dataset were more widely distributed among the channels. Whereas "Praise the Sun" is, by now, an established gamer-slang phrase in and beyond the English language

9   https://youtu.be/m5jTOmgmDE4?t=67.

space related to *Dark Souls*,[10] neither its equivalent "太陽万歳！," nor the rephrasing "太陽あれ！" have received similar attention and popularity.[11]

Conclusion and outlook

In this chapter, we have analysed several memetic practices emerging from and alongside the *Dark Souls* games, tracing their dissemination and remixes across different media (platforms) and communities of practice. As shown, "Praise the Sun" gained memetic status within a vaguely defined community precisely due to its lack of content and compatibility with visual communication, making it adaptable in a wide range of media practices across different platforms (Ascii art, Twitch icons), etc. "Giant Dad," on the other hand, could only emerge through memetic (video) practices originating from YouTube, which were then applied to the context of *Dark Souls* by a smaller, more specialized group of players who also connected it to other gaming contexts. In combination, "Praise the Sun" and "Giant Dad" demonstrate how communities diversify in practice, often extending far beyond a particular game context. At the same time, such common practices also establish and perpetuate boundaries. The "Giant Dad" serves as a means of distinction from the broader, more vaguely defined community of *Dark Souls* players within the English language space. Language boundaries appear to stop memes from travelling, at least according to our analysis of the Japanese language space.

These tentative results present us with a challenge for research into game cultural communities of practice. Such research, we argue, needs to be aware of the limitations of its terminologies, platform selections, and the language spaces it focuses on. Common practices may take different forms and follow a different logic in different language spaces and different communities of practice. Different relevances and cultural contexts may work in favour of a different set of common practices, or a different set of memes. Moreover, memetic practices may follow the same logic across different cultural or language spaces. Mapping out communities of practice across media, platforms, and language spaces required taking each of these spaces seriously in terms of their contexts, established routines, and inclinations. Considering structural similarities and differences rather than direct correspondence may be a starting point for such analysis.

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10   https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/praise-the-sun/, accessed Jan. 16, 2021.

11   https://dic.nicovideo.jp/a/%E5%A4%AA%E9%99%BD%E3%81%82%E3%82%8C%21, accessed Jan. 16, 2021.

Once we engage with common practices on a structural level, other connections become visible as well. For example, the growing presence of political content on Twitch.tv creates an interesting remix of common practices present in gaming communities. Signs of such convergence of communicative practices can be found if we consider the similarities between the memetic and emoticon-centred communication in the case of a 2018 US Congress hearing (Fig. 6) and a playthrough of *Dark Souls* (Fig. 3).
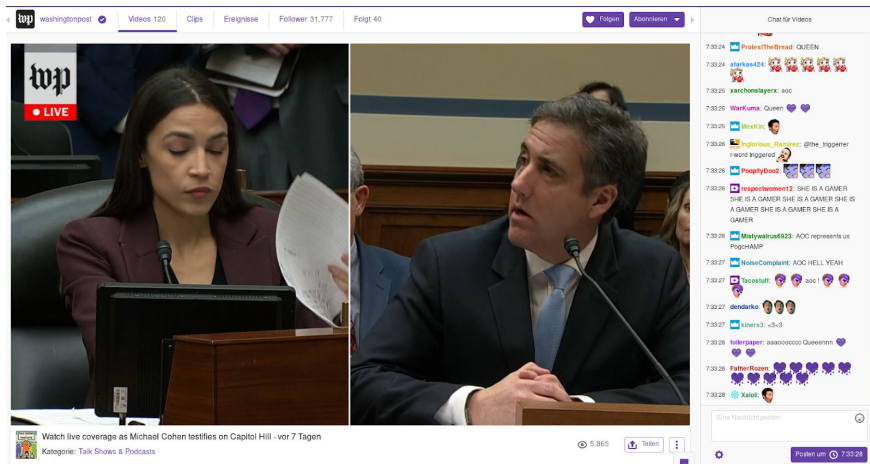

Figure 6. The *Washington Post* streams US Congress hearings live on Twitch.tv.

In both cases, commentators apply a similar style of communication to the contents – in this case, the onscreen appearance of a non-playable game character and a politician. This example suggests that on platforms like Twitch.tv, common practices travel effortlessly, even across widely different domains. Castronova (2008, 15) and others predicted that virtual worlds and their social and cultural development would have a substantial influence on non-virtual ones. This example, we might add, shows how such influence is exerted from within the virtual, as common practices established in one domain transgress the boundaries of other domains.

However, these practices are confined by what Jodi Dean (2005) calls "communicative capitalism," a form of capitalism in which communication is a central resource, means, and tool of capital accumulation. Platforms encourage and facilitate communities of practice, and by doing so they extract value (in form of data) from their users. As such, the converging practices discussed above (game-related as well as political) are part of a global capitalist system Shoshana Zuboff calls "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 2019). Based on her work, William Partin argues that Twitch.tv "monetizes data it extracts from

users by developing consumer profiles – which, in this case, are linked to viewers' Amazon accounts – in order to map and predict trends, manipulate individual and group behavior, and sell collected data in markets that individual users are barred from participating in" (Partin 2019, 158). Viewed from this angle, it is no coincidence that the *Washington Post* was the first news outlet to start streaming political content on Twitch.tv, as both companies belong to Amazon, thus providing new opportunities for gaming-based media practices to converge with other cultural domains.

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Comment By Hugo Gelis

Peter Mühleder and Martin Roth's data-based exploration sheds light on the role and use of memes in online communities. "Praise the Sun!," for example, devoid of any real meaning, lent itself perfectly to the absurdist and nonsensical humour that circulates easily on the internet. Through repetition, it established itself as a running gag and a group marker.

Again, repetition (again) lowers the bar for entry with such memes being widely known and adopting many different forms: text; emoticons, fanart; videos, etc. Some are not even the joke itself but just references to it: "sunbros" seldom need to point at the sky to share a good laugh. While popular enough to break into the general gaming subculture vocabulary and, indeed, remain part of its lexicon since 2011, this meme has barely been acknowledged by developer From Software.

Its only official commodification is an Amiibo figure, produced by Nintendo for the 2018 release of *Dark Souls Remastered*. In the wider capitalist production context, the value of such communal activities is not extracted through items but data. This "memetic capital" has value not only for users of an in-joke, but also for platforms who monetize their appeal, mechanics of communication, and retention.

Comment by Fanny Barnabé

This chapter is of great interest in terms of demonstrating that the ludic experience is far from pure, but is rather coloured by a series of other experiences that constantly interfere with it and feed it. The chapter discusses practices that can be qualified as *détournements* or transformative play, since they imbue the original game with meanings that are not necessarily native to it – as in the example of the "Giant Dad." In doing so, it shows how *détournement* is cyclically embedded in the construction of player communities: the game offers a "grip" for appropriation through an easily repeated symbol (such as the "Praise the sun" sentence); this symbol is remobilized by players in other contexts; finally, these appropriations become the support for the development of an informal community and for peer recognition. The examples developed are particularly interesting in that they show the power of symbols in this process – where other videogame collective practices, such as speedrunning, are formed around other types of unifying elements (common rules, goals, etc.). Moreover, the analyses reveal a stratification within *Dark Souls* players' communities and underline their heterogeneity. In this respect, they offer an exciting basis for refining descriptions of what "community" can mean in the context of videogame culture.