

## **Skin-deep belonging: Virtual goods as tools for children's social inclusion and exclusion in games**

*Introduction:* Playing video games is one of the largest hobbies among Norwegian children. While games represent social arenas for children to belong in, they are also commercial platforms that might create or reinforce societal differences. Studies that explore economic conditions and digital exclusion in gaming environments from children's own perspective, are called for. Hence, this paper seeks to understand how children belong in games, and why and how they might be excluded.

*Methods:* The results are based on an ethnographic mapping of seven commercial games and twenty semi-structured interviews with Norwegian children aged between 10-15 years.

*Results:* The analysis draws on dramaturgic loyalty and symbolic interactionism as conceptual tools. Preliminary analyses suggest that children belong to other players through the virtual goods they purchase in-game. Virtual goods, such as "skins", facilitate social interaction and have symbolic meaning for children, by signaling group belonging or non-belonging. Players all play their part in achieving belonging in the game through unwritten rules of social interaction.

*Conclusions:* The results indicate that belonging in gaming platforms is partly contingent on economic and material conditions. The implications of these findings will be discussed in light of social inclusion and economic (in)equality.