



Web3 and deep play: Blockchain gaming in the Global South

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journals.sagepub.com/home/nms**Saskia Witteborn** 

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR

Abstract

The article argues for the sociocultural contextualization of Web3 affordances by examining play-to-earn gaming in the Philippines. It first outlines how socioeconomic factors promote blockchain technology and cryptocurrency. Against this background, and based on scholarship in cultural communication, anthropology, and critical platform studies, the article illustrates how sociocultural frames shape the interpretation and enactment of blockchain-based gameplay affordances. A Grounded Theory analysis of interviews and documents reveals that players identify persistent access and ownership as technical affordances, performing them through the cultural frame of cockfighting and its digital economy version, the side hustle. The study challenges universalist notions of Web3 adoption, highlighting how technical affordances both support and disrupt sociocultural and economic reproduction through narratives of family, competition, and inclusivity. The research calls for comparative studies on how platform corporations structure societies in emerging economies, how platforms exploit culture as use value, and how adopters strategically utilize Web3 technologies.

Keywords

Blockchain, cryptocurrency, culture, gender, Global South, NFT, platform labor, play-to-earn games, technical affordance, Web3

Corresponding author:

Saskia Witteborn, School of Journalism and Communication, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, New Territories, Hong Kong SAR.

Email: sawit@cuhk.edu.hk

Axie is like cockfighting – just the digitized and more colorful version. But the game has paved the way. If it weren't for Axie, people would not have digital wallets or learn about NFTs and crypto. Axie is still a side hustle for young people, and we liked the flexibility of playing it, especially during COVID-19.

The quote is from Teo,¹ a 20-year-old university student in the Philippines. Hustling, flexibility, cryptocurrency, and NFTs (non-fungible tokens) are Web3 vocabularies that highlight the technical affordances of the Web3 game explored in this study. Axie Infinity is a play-to-earn game characterized by skills-based interactions that combine strategy and entertainment with elements of betting and chance play (King et al., 2015). The game runs on blockchain technology and rewards players through income and financial speculation on non-fungible tokens (NFTs) and cryptocurrency (Egliston and Carter, 2024). Axie Infinity was co-founded by Trung Nguyen and the studio Sky Mavis² in Vietnam, representing Web3 innovation in emerging economies that are open to cryptocurrency and have a young population (Kshetri, 2023). Players engage in a Pokémon-type battle and acquire Smooth Love Potion (SLP), a digital in-game currency. Players can sell SLPs to breed Axies (NFTs) or sell Axies that they have bred. Players can also rent Axies for a profit and trade SLP and NFTs via the Ethereum sub-chain Ronin. In 2024, there were 200 active or planned play-to-earn games, with Axie Infinity remaining the most popular (Delic and Delfabbro, 2024).

Emerging economies constitute large markets for blockchain³ games and digital platforms (Gonzalez, 2021). In the Philippines, digital media and e-commerce contributed 9.4% to the Gross Domestic Product in 2022 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023). After Nigeria and Vietnam, the Philippines had the third-highest cryptocurrency adoption rate in 2020. The reasons are a large underbanked population, trust in the safety of digital currency, a young population (Yasay, 2021), and an extensive overseas migrant labor force that needs to process remittances (ILO (International Labor Organization), n.d.). Economic necessity, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a history of gaming and gambling have created fertile ground for Web3 developers to push into the country and for adopters to experiment with play-to-earn gaming.

Despite the wealth of studies on platform labor, open questions remain about the large player base in the Philippines⁴ (e.g. De Jesus et al., 2022; Delfabbro et al., 2022; Delic and Delfabbro, 2024). There are an estimated 16.54 million gamers in the Philippines, out of a population of almost 120 million (Balita, 2024). In the quote from the beginning, the interviewee uses words such as *cockfighting* and *side hustle*. While *side hustle* is part of the vocabulary of the gig economy (Montgomery and Baglioni, 2021), *cockfighting* refers to a long-standing betting practice in the Philippines. The repeated reference to cockfighting and side hustle raises the question of how cultural repertoire shapes interpretations of Web3⁵ applications. This study focuses on this question and contributes to the literature on the sociocultural contextualization of emerging technologies.

Technologies and the Global South⁶

In the literature on next-generation technologies, scholars have critiqued how Western corporations use Global South countries as experimentation grounds for their innovations.

Concepts such as data colonialism,⁷ technocolonialism, or blockchain imperialism critique data extraction in the name of “technology for social betterment” (e.g. Atilas, 2022; Byler, 2022; Couldry and Meijas, 2018; Jutel, 2021; Posada, 2024). Jutel (2021), for example, uses the term *blockchain imperialism* to explore data extraction in the South Pacific. Madianou (2024) discusses how digital technologies, platforms, and AI reproduce colonial logics in the humanitarian sector.

Digital platforms mobilize financial and affective desire (Bhattacharya, 2018: ix) through a strategy that McMillan Cottom (2020: 443) calls “predatory inclusion.” “Predatory inclusion is the logic, organization, and technique of including marginalized consumer-citizens into ostensibly democratizing mobility schemes on extractive terms” (McMillan Cottom, 2020: 443). In the case of digital gaming, these extractive terms have been discussed extensively, including the exploitation of surplus labor in low-income countries and the psychological and financial risks involved in gameplay⁸ (e.g. Altenried and Bojadzijeve, 2017; Delfabbro et al., 2022; Delic and Delfabbro, 2024; Francisco et al., 2022; King et al., 2015; Zaucha, 2024; Zaucha and Agur, 2025). Gaming companies from the United States have recruited players from the Global South since the early 2000s. For example, Internet Gaming Entertainment Ltd (IGE) outsourced its low-wage customer service to Hong Kong SAR and hired thousands of Chinese gamers to labor for foreign investors in factory-style conditions in the People’s Republic of China (Altenried and Bojadzijeve, 2017). Delfabbro et al. (2022) compare the current play-to-earn gaming conditions to those labor practices in the 2010s (Tai and Hu, 2018; Zhang and Fung, 2014).

The media also encourages predatory inclusion in the context of gameplay. In the case of Axie Infinity, the widely watched YouTube documentary *Play-to-Earn* uses a narrative of community and poverty elimination. The documentary was produced and narrated by Leah Callon-Butler, director of Emfarsis, a Manila-based investment and communications firm advising Web3 startups. The documentary’s director, Nathan Smale, states:

Our goal was to show the world that emerging nations like the Philippines will bring crypto to the masses. (. . .) Emerging nations don’t need handouts, they need opportunities. (. . .) Play-to-Earn is just the start, it is building a huge community through gaming that natively understands the benefits and advantages of cryptocurrency. (Mislos, 2021)

The documentary was one among many mediated Web3 promotions that narrated play-to-earn games as opportunities for income generation in Southeast Asia. The blockchain industry in Europe participated in circulating these narratives (Creator, 2022). Indeed, the promise of income was the most significant motivating factor for joining play-to-earn gaming platforms like Axie Infinity in the Philippines (Francisco et al., 2022). The Philippines is a lower-middle-income country with a thriving informal sector, dependence on domestic consumption and remittances, and low saving rates (Ke, 2024).

At the same time, the narrative of the Global South as the technological sandbox of the Global North has received granular iterations. Scholars continue to push for geopolitically diversified views. Costa (2018) and McDonald (2016), for example, illustrate how technical affordances are localized through collective practices in Türkiye and rural

China. Based on case studies from Brazil to India and Bangladesh, Arora (2024) argues for shifting the narrative of technological gloom to one of aspiration in southern countries. Shah (2015) shows that the notion of the individual in India is changing through self-referential networks and data architectures that define and control access to personalized resources. The present article is another intervention into universalist narratives about technological affordances, highlighting the sociocultural moorings of next-generation technologies and how adopters in emerging economies use technologies strategically.

Affordance research

Early affordance scholarship emphasized individual perception and interpretation (Gibson, 1966). Hutchby (2001) challenged this perspective and argued for a relational view. He maintained that the built-in affordances of technologies invite contextualized social action, linking humans, other-than-humans, and sociocultural practices with imagined and actualized outcomes. This relational approach was taken up by Nagy and Neff (2015), who described sociotechnical affordance as an opportunity for action shaped by sociocultural and economic context. Nevertheless, the majority of affordance studies have been conducted in a Western context with universalizing conclusions (Costa, 2018). Costa (2018) underscores that affordances should be researched as situated practices that link users, platforms, socioeconomic, and cultural conditions. Moreover, Evans et al. (2017)⁹ critique the conceptual vagueness of affordances and define them by exclusion. First, an affordance is neither just an object nor a feature of technology (e.g. privacy setting function). Second, an affordance is not an outcome (e.g. securing privacy through a setting function is an outcome, not an affordance). Third, affordances range in variability.

The sociocultural and relational approaches contain at least two theoretical insights. First, engagement with technology affordances is based on collective practices, not just individual perception (Gibson, 1966). Second, users adapt technology affordances to their specific context. This study adopts a sociocultural and relational approach, which posits that technology users perform technical affordances collectively and frame them through their shared sociocultural interpretations.

Grounded theory

Grounded Theory (GT) is productive for exploring the affordances of a technology, along with their properties and relationships. Grounded Theory is a structured process where a researcher creates the theoretical apparatus through a continuing data material collection and analysis process without imposing a conceptual frame. Constant comparison is part of the process (see Charmaz, 2008; Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1998 for different approaches to GT).

I started with open coding, looking for repeatedly occurring key terms, also called in-vivo codes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The identified key terms are *cockfighting* and *side hustle*. Recurring key themes include *place for gaming*, *time flexibility*, *stress*, *family support*, *income*, *owning* Axies, and *skills*. I then constructed categories based on these

terms and themes through axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In the final step, selective coding integrates categories around a core category. No new meanings emerge as the data materials are saturated (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

I identified the core category as the *sociocultural contextualization of technical affordances*, with *persistent access* and *ownership* as the main affordances. Persistent access and ownership are not outcomes but affordances (Evans et al., 2017) as they are programmed into the gaming platform and financial infrastructure.¹⁰ Persistent access means the gaming platform is “always open” and can be joined once a player is registered.¹¹ The blockchain-based game also affords legal NFT and cryptocurrency ownership (Sadowski and Beegle, 2023) and skills. These assets require ongoing access to the game for optimization. *Cockfighting* references a sociocultural practice through which players make sense of persistent access and ownership. *Side hustle* reflects a variant of the cockfight in the context of a globalized digital economy.

The data materials for this study include 40 interviews with Axie Infinity players in the Philippines conducted from October 2022 to May 2023. First, the research assistant circulated a call for interviewees on Facebook groups, including Axie Infinity Philippines and Axie Infinity Scholarship. Facebook was the most relevant platform in the Philippines at that time. The response was muted, as netizens were weary of spamming. Second, the research assistant recruited participants through the social media network of an academic institution. Third, participants were also recruited through the research assistant’s personal social media network. The research assistant created public posts shared across Facebook groups, Instagram, and X, with the link to screening questions to determine eligibility. Interviewees included both females and males,¹² aged 18 to 35, who were predominantly BA-level students in civil engineering, psychology, statistics, or media studies, as well as graduates working in Metro Manila and nearby cities. Interviewees were compensated 60 HKD per interview (8 USD or 450 Philippine Pesos¹³ for 45 minutes to 1.5 hours). Moreover, industry and media reports about the game were analyzed, including documents from Coindesk, Axie Infinity, and Chainalysis, and articles on *rappler.com*, a Filipino news website co-founded by Nobel Peace Prize winner Maria Ressa.

In summary, this study develops existing arguments related to the hype and exploitative nature of Web3 affordances by exploring the contextualization of technical affordances. The research is not a study of digital games per se but aims to expand scholarship on how technical affordances are socioculturally framed. The following questions guided this research: Which technical affordances do Axie Infinity players in the Philippines identify and perform in their gaming practice? What are the characteristics of the affordances and the relationships between them? How do players contextualize the game’s affordances in sociocultural ways?

From cockfight to side hustle: cultural resources and gameplay in the digital economy

The interviewees used *cockfighting* as a simile to activate a sociocultural frame of competition, communal experience, and chance play. A simile is a rhetorical device and

figure of speech that compares two things, events, or entities (Murfin and Ray, 2003). Speaking means acting in sociocultural ways (Bauman and Sherzer, 1974). Examples include calling a digital game a *cockfight*, thereby highlighting the risks and opportunities of gaming for the self and the community, and critiquing or legitimizing the game based on shared interpretations. This link between language, culture, and communal practice has been firmly established in the literature (Bauman and Sherzer, 1974; Philipsen, 1992; Witteborn, 2021, 2023).

Cockfighting is a competitive blood sport and gambling event that has been practiced from Spain (Marvin, 1984) and Bali (Geertz, 1973) to the UK and the Philippines (Guggenheim, 1994). In his discussion of cockfighting in Bali, Clifford Geertz (1973) contradicts the notion that cockfighting is “deep play,” meaning a high-risk gambling event that is purely irrational, given the outcome. The concept “deep play” goes back to British philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1931[1789], note to p. 106), a defender of utilitarianism. From his perspective, gambling cannot be morally right as the effects tend to be problematic (with a high risk of losing money and ruining one self and one’s family).

Based on his research in Bali, Clifford Geertz (1973) argues that high-risk games have social significance. People engage in high-risk “deep play” to confirm their social identity in a competitive ritual. Guggenheim (1994) confirms this idea for the Philippines. Geertz (1973) speculates that the cockfight has both creative and destructive powers. At stake are personal honor, pride, masculinity, and respect, which Geertz summarizes as “status” (p. 433). This status is gendered. Roosters are “symbolic expressions or magnifications of their owner’s self, the narcissistic male ego (. . .)” (p. 419). Cockfighting can be understood as a “paradigmatic human event” (Geertz, 1973: 450). The event speaks to a universal condition, namely the behaviors and emotions of humans in response to struggle, loss, and gain.

Cockfighting has deep cultural significance in the Philippines where fights are still legal. The World Slasher Cup is held biannually in Quezon City, and SabongTV is a dedicated cockfighting channel (<https://www.sabongtv.net>). Cockfighting has been sanctioned by various actors over the centuries, from small village communities to governments (Guggenheim, 1994; Lawphil Project, 2021). While gambling functioned as a social cohesion mechanism in small agrarian communities (Geertz, 1973), it has become an important source of tax revenue (Lawphil Project, 2021). The betting industry is organized through Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs), which are umbrella firms for smaller companies that help with labor recruitment, rental space, and legal issues (Camba, 2023). These operators have been accused of illegally employing migrants and were banned in 2024 by the Government of the Philippines (Gomez, 2024).

The interviewees also framed gameplay as a *side hustle*. The meanings they assigned to the term are similar to those of *side hustle* in the gig economy, including flexibility, informal income, and the narrative of social inclusivity (Marčeta, 2021; Montgomery and Baglioni, 2021; van Doorn, 2017). The term adds a socioeconomic dimension to the original cockfight, as discussed by Geertz (1973). In the play-to-earn economy, gameplay transforms from a competitive practice that affirms social cohesion into an informal side activity in which the promise of monetary gain lures people into the gaming space. Persistent access and ownership are the two technical affordances that enable this promise. Unlike cockfighting, which has an assigned place and time in the communal

schedule, the play-to-earn gaming pit is always open. This “always open, always on” affordance creates opportunities and pressures for players, as discussed in the following section.

Persistent access

The global COVID-19 pandemic set the socioeconomic conditions for game adoption. COVID-19 lockdowns amplified pre-existing economic and racialized hierarchies (De Jesus et al., 2022; Papamichail, 2023). From the United States and the UK to Brazil, workers in low-wage sectors were overexposed to the virus while their survival rate depended on access to healthcare. In the Philippines, workers in the informal economy viewed digital labor as the safer option compared to sectors with public exposure. Students and those with full-time jobs engaged with play-to-earn gaming as a side hustle to either supplement their income or generate funds due to family unemployment.

Persistent access has the following dimensions: team, time, and place. The team dimension relates to kinship. Hiring players was a family and friendship affair. This insight validates Geertz’ (1973) and Turner’s (1982) ideas that gameplay affirms cultural expectations. Geertz (1973: 437) writes: “A man virtually never bets against a cock owned by a member of his own kingroup.” Team members had clearly defined roles. About 15% of the players in this sample were so-called *managers*. Managers had invested in the game when the cryptocurrency rate and NFT prices were low. They owned Axie NFTs and rented them out. Those without the resources to buy NFTs were *scholars*. They were recruited through social media and received a percentage of the earnings for their labor. *Scholars* played as “employees” to earn money or improve their skills and in turn, their pay cut. *Managers* had to ensure that all their Axie NFTs were played to secure a return on investment, which involved hiring capable players through *scholarships* and optimizing the use of the persistent access affordance.

Roberto exemplifies the importance of persistent access for flexible income generation and family support. He was 20 years old and had a statistics and communication studies background. He emphasized that “the game is a side hustle.” Roberto learned about Axie through YouTube documentaries and played between 3 to 8 hours daily. His highest income was USD 600 (34225 Philippine Pesos). He had a digital Ronin wallet that was transacted through G-cash. Roberto earned money for his tuition and helped his sister, who wanted to study medicine. He played on his phone, which had fast Internet, allowing him to choose when and where to game. His reference to “side hustle” indicates that gaming was transactional, focused on generating income for his sister and convenient flexibility. As soon as these expectations were unfulfilled, Roberto, who was a *scholar*, stopped playing.

Carlos is another example of using Axie as a side hustle to support his and his family’s income. The game’s continuous availability fit his schedule. He played in his room at night, often until 3 am, and was proud of contributing to household income. He was 20 years old with a high school degree. A close friend had hired him. He studied accounting in senior high school but had to stop due to financial problems. Carlos worked night shifts in a call center, earning around USD 500 a month (28520 Philippine Pesos) which was insufficient to carry out his plans. Carlos wanted to go to Iceland for its educational

opportunities. The “side hustle” was convenient, allowing him to combine gaming with his call center job. Most importantly, the income helped his family save money. He started with 20% of the profit as a player when he learned the game from scratch, moving to a 50-50 split with his manager later. He made 8 USD daily as a scholar (450 Philippine Pesos) but then became a manager and owned Axies. To be fair and reward players, he kept the 50-50 ratio.

The Internet’s “always on” character and ubiquitous connectivity created pressure to play. Persistent access, as an inherent game affordance, shaped the players’ daily schedules, influencing when to wake up, study, work, and sleep. To optimize success, beginning players gamed in the early morning hours, as those hours promised a higher chance of winning. Young mothers played at night when household chores were completed. Those with full-time jobs played during working hours or their breaks. Students sent their Axies into the pit during Zoom lectures. Dino, a 21-year-old civil engineering student, echoed this timeline, waking up at 5 am to game for several hours, sometimes continuing during his morning Zoom lectures.

Continuous access to the game also means securing a physical place for gaming activities. Most interviewees had their own room and could choose when to play. Others converted the family living room into a gaming space in the early morning or late at night and removed their computer equipment when the family reclaimed the room. Arturo, 20 years old and a university student, said: “I wake up at 4 am and play in the living room. The house is small, and the family is large. These are the only hours when it is quiet, and I can concentrate.” Enrique, a 21-year-old student, played in the early hours in the small living room of his uncle, who had taken him in during the pandemic. Other interviewees redefined restrooms or workspaces as gaming locations. In summary, playing Axie relies on family and friendship ties, ensuring sociocultural reproduction while altering economic roles within the family. Family ties and close friendships create reciprocity and obligations for those who hire and those who play. Gaming also defines domestic space and time schedules for individuals and families.

At the same time, gameplay challenges cultural expectations (Turner, 1982). The majority of *managers* were males. They used the promise of gender neutrality to ensure persistent gameplay. Dolores, a 22-year-old civil engineering student, typifies the gender-neutral promise and the social pressure that in-family hiring practices produced. She recounted how her uncle had hired her, offering her a 40% cut of the win, with 60% going to him. She was a beginner and satisfied. She played in her room during times she could choose:

Playing helped me to show my family that I care a lot about them, especially during the pandemic when my father became unemployed. I could take care of my tuition. I think my parents were proud of me, and my uncle was happy, as he saw that I worked hard to learn gaming strategy.

The pressure arose when she felt ashamed of not meeting expectations. Dolores represents many players who put their NFTs into the battle arena alongside their gender identity. Dolores soon experienced the pressure to win, as well as misogyny. Losing in

Axie battles led to mockery on *Discord* and diminished profits, pushing Dolores to try harder. Playing Axie became a full-time exercise in self-protection against insults.

Reyna is another example of this double burden. She decided to join the game during the pandemic when money became tight. Reyna's mother, a school principal, was the sole breadwinner. Reyna usually played from 8 pm until midnight. She had gained access to the game through her brother who integrated her into a team of players. She earned 330 USD (18824 Philippine Pesos) and bought Christmas gifts for her family and books for her licensing exams. Reyna was a cheerful and upbeat young woman, proud of being the first female mentor for playing Axie in her circles. Like many female players, she was always on guard to protect herself from sexual harassment: "Oh yes, the majority are male. When players know they are playing with a woman, they ask her to send pictures and personal information. They complement her voice and ask her out."

Jessica, a 22-year-old civil engineering student, confirmed this observation: "There are many stereotypes about women in online gaming. 'Women are not great players, and they are too emotional and talkative.' Playing gave me the motivation to prove them wrong." Flores, a 21-year-old accounting student, was weary of these comments: "At first, I tried to ignore them but then called these players out on their prejudice and ignorant parroting of stereotypes." These quotes reappeared in similar forms in the interviews. The women gathered on social media to support each other and to seek advice on gaming tactics. These practices were important in the context of persistent access, where the women had to perform in a seemingly endless gaming circuit within a gender-biased environment, often in the early morning hours or at night, alone in their rooms.

Ownership

Nabben (2023) describes "cryptographically verifiable ownership in digital domains" as part of Web3 ideologies and as constituting personal agency. In this study, ownership consists of intangible properties: NFTs as unique identifiers recorded on the blockchain, cryptocurrency, and skills. These properties expand the definition of ownership by Nabben (2023) and Sadowski and Beegle (2023) from legal possession of digital assets to human skills.

Raphael, a 21-year-old from Manila, accessed the game for ownership options with the anticipated outcome of profit generation. He legitimized gaming with his strong family values:

We were ahead of the investment opportunity. Before the hype and all the fame it got, I caught wind of Axie Infinity. In my case, I gave a 40-60 cut in favor of the player. It was my decision, but I was mainly motivated to help my family. My health deteriorated during that time, and I felt constant mental stress. People became greedier. It was just a money grab. The competitiveness was fun, though. I earned a solid USD 3000 to 4000 a month for the first half of the year.

Raphael represents the player who made a profit due to differential access to capital (Zaucha, 2024) and his previous investment experience (see Delfabbro et al., 2022). By being a *manager* and owning NFTs, his role within the family changed from son to provider. There are several examples like Raphael in the dataset. He stands for a shift in family roles, though this shift was only short-term for many players.

Ownership also refers to possessing skills. Maria, a 23-year-old with a BA degree in psychology, started gaming to support family, although she was aware of the risky nature of the game and the volatility of NFT prices and in-game currency. However, Maria also saw the play-to-earn game as providing her with skills and economic safety. Persistent access appealed to her as it allowed her to make money according to her schedule. She was fluent in Tagalog and English and a customer service representative for a medical transport company. Her mother was a travel agent and had taken her to East and Southeast Asia and North America. Maria knew how to build computers and could program basic HTML, which she had learned from her brother. Maria's brother was her manager and shared his Axie NFTs. She was "proud" to contribute to the family's well-being. The precarious side hustle became a setting for social role performance (being a good daughter and supporting family) and acquiring leadership and fintech skills:

Overall, I made USD 545 a month (31000 Philippine Pesos), and my brother around USD 4000 (228166 Philippine Pesos). My brother is a first-year college student and has earned a lot of money. I helped him win. Our parents are not in the best shape, so we helped them. We renovated our house and bought new appliances. There were many women on our team, including our cousins. We had to put up with many jokes about women playing, but we ignored them and just played smart. I was one of the first scholars to be trained in strategy and cryptocurrency, which are great skills. But playing Axie soon felt like a chore and became a side hustle.

For Aurora, gaming was about preparation for the job market. She was 21 years old and a 4th-year student in business and accountancy. Her father was a civil engineer, and her mother was a government physician. Aurora knew how to code basic C++ and HTML, which she had learned in high school. She was invited by a friend to play and took online classes to understand the game. Eventually, she made USD 500 monthly (28520 Philippine Pesos) as a scholar until she stopped playing. "It has opened opportunities for me. I can leverage those to drive innovation in the future. Fintech will not be strange to me, and I can adapt faster," Aurora said.

This view is backed by Domenica, a 22-year-old psychology student, who strategically engaged with the game as a "side hustle" to save for medical school and ease the burden on family finances. Domenica was an avid gamer and content creator who tested platforms such as Decentraland in Hong Kong and the United States and blogged about them. She had earned USD 1000 (57,000 Philippine Pesos) several times. Like Aurora, Domenica evaluated the game as high-risk and prone to volatility. Nevertheless, ownership meant personal agency for her to develop content creation skills and contribute to monthly family expenses.

Geertz (1973) asserted that cockfighting teaches young people social role behavior, affect performance, and social order. The same applies to play-to-earn gaming. Gamers practiced their social roles in the family and acquired skills. They also shifted economic roles by becoming providers. The young people learned about leadership, managing interpersonal conflicts, expressing and regulating emotions, and distributing profits. Web3 skills were attractive to women who took them for personal development and as entry tickets into the digital economy.

Nardi (2010) observed that gameplay implies freedom, pleasure, skills, and the absence of social obligations and physical needs. Play-to-earn games change two crucial aspects, according to this study. First, players are motivated by pleasure and the pressure of social obligations and monetary needs. Like in a cockfight, players extend themselves into the pit through their NFTs to compete for fun and to support the family. In the digital economy version of the cockfight—the play-to-earn side hustle—players still put family first. However, in this new cockfighting practice, community bonding is gradually reduced to a socioeconomic activity that ceases after the economic gain motif disappears. The majority of Axie players had quit the game by the end of this study.

Second, persistent access and ownership create anxiety (compare De Jesus et al., 2022; Delic and Delfabbro, 2024; Francisco et al., 2022). “Axie is a grind. It is like the stock market, and the price is very volatile. I was so stressed” (Milo, 22 years old, civil engineering student). Women had to cope with the additional burden of misogyny which resulted in negative emotions, including anger about the persistence of derogatory stereotypes.

Conclusion

The article argues for a contextualized perspective on Web3 affordances and a granular narrative of technological agency in the Global South. The study illustrates how socio-cultural repertoires shape interpretations and performances of Web3 affordances. I will first answer the guiding questions for this research before I discuss the implications for future analysis.

Cockfighting is the interpretive frame through which players make sense of the game’s competitive yet communal character and the persistent access and ownership affordances. Persistent access requires loyal players who are recruited from family and close friendship networks. These recruitment and team strategies stabilize sociocultural reproduction while also challenging it. Women pushed against misogyny and imposed social roles. Persistent access also defines spatial and temporal economies, influencing the meaning and character of domestic space and personal and collective time schedules. Overall, persistent access structures social relations and supports reciprocity in kinship relations (see Kallinikos, 2006 on how software systems structure human activity). Kinship obligations encourage fair profit distribution and mentoring of new players.

Ownership ensures socioeconomic reproduction through private asset accumulation and skills acquisition in a global digital economy. Like the animal in a cockfight, NFT ownership is tied to personal aspirations and a strong sense of family obligation and support. Ownership requires persistent access to digital platforms for ongoing economic optimization. At the same time, ownership shifts economic roles within the family and turns affective bonds into transactional ones. Sons and daughters become investors and part of the owning class. They manage family members and friends and position them as informal wage labor. These examples highlight again how technology can stabilize social units like the family while shifting related roles.

Blockchain games can be described as the new digital cockfighting arenas, serving as spaces for economic opportunity and social bonding. The “arena mode” in the Axie Infinity game is a semantic gesture to the competitive nature of the activity. On the one

hand, players frame the gaming space through the narrative of competition in the name of family and community. Social cohesion needs to be maintained in the face of economic pressures during high uncertainty (COVID-19 pandemic). This central premise allows for changing economic roles within the family. On the other hand, *side hustling*, as an iteration of traditional cockfighting, partially erodes the social bonding function of gameplay and turns it into an economically oriented, transactional endeavor.

Players are informed critics and aware of the exploitative potential of digital labor, viewing the game's business model as a "money grab" and recognizing the negative psychological and physical consequences of gaming.¹⁴ The player base in this study engaged with the affordances of play-to-earn business models strategically. The predominantly university-educated players in their 20s used predatory platform inclusion to their economic and social advantage, either to support family during uncertainty or to prepare for the globalized digital economy labor market. When disadvantages outweighed advantages, the gamers exited.

Axie Infinity enforces a neoliberal logic despite strategic adoption and emancipatory promises. Many players embraced ownership and thickened the neoliberal narrative of socioeconomic success through competition, risk-taking, and flexible labor. The game was supported by U.S. venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz (Simpson, 2021), meaning that the long arm of global finance capital touched the players and engaged their cultural knowledge through its use value. The family is the cultural prop through which the logic of competition in the platform economy is legitimized and actualized.

van Doorn's (2017) intersectional approach to the platform economy argues that gender, class, and racial divisions are structurally woven into on-demand platform labor. The shrinking middle class in the United States, which sells its embodied labor to make-ends-meets, can be compared to the middle-class play-to-earn gamers in the Philippines. The play-to-earn game and the on-demand platform economy require interchangeable surplus labor (Tyner, 2013), which is readily available in the Philippines. Women are included in this surplus labor as long as they follow the principles of risk-taking, capital accumulation, and emancipatory storytelling. The latter insight links to the gender-preserving logic of immersive gaming. Boellstorff (2008) observed in his study of *Second Life* that the platform reinforced gender norms through performative means, such as default animations for women. While the platform enabled gender diverse identities, binary gender categories remained stable referents.

Moreover, playing Axie Infinity contributes to national reproduction. Bhimani et al. (2022) argue for a strong correlation between cryptocurrency adoption, education, and network readiness, which refers to the preparedness of a national economy for technology adoption. The majority of interviewees in this study have an advanced level of college education and play in an environment that encourages cryptocurrency (Mislos, 2021). Axie Infinity supports national cryptocurrency adoption goals in the Philippines through investment and Web3 training, as well as the promise of community-building. The tropes of family and gendered socioeconomic inclusion are the cultural and political crutches that legitimize these goals.

What are predictions then for the future of Web3 development in the Global South? Existing research has already highlighted the dangers. From El Salvador to Venezuela, governments push cryptocurrencies to attract foreign investment, risking corruption and environmental problems (Atiles, 2022). Cuéllar (2021), for example, outlines the

potential environmental impact of Bitcoin mining on the water and electricity supply in local communities in El Salvador. The author argues that El Salvador's cryptocurrency plans could transform the country into a deregulated offshore market like Panama. In another study, Klein (2018) illustrates how crypto investors in Puerto Rico are primarily young, White, US-born, educated males. These findings suggest that locally and globally connected elites will continue to drive Web3 promotion and adoption. The university population in this study provides further evidence for this prediction. Early *manager* adopters were in their 20s and had the resources to access global technology through their multilingual, economic, and other social capital. Multinationals will continue to target socioeconomically disadvantaged groups and the growing middle classes in emerging economies, promoting risk-taking and speculation as cultural techniques to advance cryptocurrency and Web3 applications. Melamed (2015) maintained that "Capital can (. . .) only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups" (p. 77). Play-to-earn games will continue to reproduce transnational and local labor divisions while promoting class and gender inclusivity through utopian platform narratives.

Future studies can analyze how venture capital-backed technologies structure social life in emerging economies by activating cultural practices and interpretations for the domestication of technology. National comparisons or tracing of Web3 practices across geopolitical space can expose predatory strategies by regionally and globally operating platform corporations. Moreover, these studies can continue to produce evidence of how local communities exploit platform logics for their own purposes. As an Axie Infinity player emphasized: "Without us, there is no game."

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ORCID iD

Saskia Witteborn  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1764-7022>

Notes

1. Names are pseudonyms to protect participant privacy.
2. In 2024, Sky Mavis was located in Singapore.
3. Blockchain is a decentralized permanent ledger that records transactions across peer-to-peer networks (Baym et al., 2019).
4. Forty percent of Axie players were located in the Philippines in 2022 (Statista, 2024).
5. Four blockchain-run applications that constitute the backbone of Web3 are cryptocurrencies, non-fungible tokens (NFTs), DAOs, and metaverses (Murray et al., 2022).
6. The term *Global South* captures the perception and realities of people in lower- and

middle-income countries to be denied agency in their socioeconomic, political, and historical potential to restructure the global order (Hogan and Patrick, 2024).

7. The concept *data colonialism* has also been critiqued as bolstering the heteronormative European center, which universalizes knowledge, thereby silencing ways of knowing (Mumford, 2021).
8. *Gameplay* refers to the process of engaging with a computer game and to the game elements that create a rewarding experience (Oxland, 2004).
9. Evans et al.'s (2017) propose a relational model that mediates between object, user perception, user practice, and outcomes. This process model avoids a deterministic relationship between technology features and outcome. This study is a grounded theory study that does not impose extant frameworks, so the model is not used here.
10. The importance of digital wallets shows their deep embeddedness in a platform's infrastructure. The wallets point to a network of additional financial actors that need to be folded into a discussion of platforms, including financial brokers, connectors, and institutions, as Posada (2024) points out. The analysis of these actors goes beyond the scope of this article.
11. Exceptions are Internet blackouts due to infrastructure overload or adverse weather that are not considered here as those represent breakdowns that are not programmed into the gaming platform.
12. The interviewees identified as either male or female. Therefore, the study adopts these binary gender categories.
13. The currency exchange rate on October 9, 2024.
14. These findings confirm extant studies on the effects of monetized motivation on player well-being (De Jesus et al., 2022; Delfabbro et al., 2022; Francisco et al., 2022; Peracchia et al., 2019).

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Author biography

Saskia Witteborn is a Professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). She specializes in critical technology studies, focusing on the geopolitics of identity, the datification of migration, Web3, and AI and communication research. She authored *Unruly Speech: Displacement and the Politics of Transgression* (Stanford, 2023), co-edited *The SAGE Handbook of Media and Migration* (SAGE, 2020), and co-authored *Together: Communicating Interpersonally. A Social Construction Approach* (Oxford, 2005).