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# *HAMSTER KOMBAT*: EXCURSUS INTO A BLOCKCHAIN GAME

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***Abstract:*** *"Hamster Kombat" is one of the last evolutions in a long line of token-based projects that promised one of the most attractive airdrops in the history of blockchain cryptocurrency. In this article I expound an anthropological excursus about it. I intend to emphasize new perspectives into the ways in which digital activities and artefacts are imagined and represented on this blockchain game. Drawing upon publications from the past two decades, I use Hamster Kombat as an example to draw attention to the relevance of blockchain games for digital anthropologists.*

***Key words:*** *blockchain, crypto token, digital artefacts, non-fungible token (NFT), simulacra* of simulation, *smart contract.*

## 1. Introduction

Blockchain became a topic of interest for anthropology in the past decade. Out of the plethora of technologies associated with blockchain and cryptocurrency, the crypto mobile games have been implemented in various ways in the past four years. *Hamster Kombat* was developed on *The Open Network* (TON) and hosted on the *Telegram* platform. It was launched on the 26th of March 2024. In six months, the game was played by more than 300 million players worldwide. In September 2024 the game had more than 100 million monthly users (2024). Positioned at the junction between gaming and crypto industries, *Hamster Kombat* occupies a new niche: it was envisioned by its developers as a blockchain gaming platform.

My paper does not contain a literature review. Instead, it is meant to be an excursus and an invitation for anthropologists to study this new domain of interest. Based on ongoing research into the *Hamster Kombat* environment, I suggest some directions for approaching the representation of value and/ or digital artefacts in a blockchain game (i.e. crypto tokens, NFTs etc.). In my endeavour, I use the term 'value' of digital artefacts with the meaning of a mental construct that limits the players' free will. 'Value' as an umbrella concept has on blockchain more than an economic relevance. It also entails political, social and cultural facets.

I begin my article by reviewing the features of the *Hamster Kombat* blockchain game.

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Afterwards, I describe the management of tokens entailed by this game as an example of Jean Baudrillard's 'simulacra of simulation' (1981/ 2010, p. 121). In the final chapter of my article I expound several perspectives regarding the anthropology of blockchain games, with an emphasis on *Hamster Kombat*.

## 2. *Hamster Kombat* reviewed

The *Hamster Kombat* was developed on *The Open Network* (TON) as a play-to-earn game hosted on the *Telegram* platform. The game aspires to become an easy-to-use gaming platform in which the player has the role of a hamster CEO that manages a fictional crypto exchange. Interestingly, the game was connected with some of the most popular real Crypto exchange platforms, even before launching its own crypto token (i.e. $HMSTR) on the 26th of September 2024. The humour entailed by the name of the game is part and parcel of the gameplay. In order to play *Hamster Kombat*, the players must engage in a series of activities such as: (1) tapping the screen to earn coins; (2) mining and upgrading cards that provide passive income; (3) the exchange is providing passive profit per hour when the player is not in the game for maximum three hours; (4) levelling up increases the passive income and earning opportunities; (5) completing specific tasks, such as playing a plethora of affiliated games; (6) inviting and helping friends are activities that award bonuses; (7) earning achievements to obtain further bonuses; (8) viewing videos on the dedicated *YouTube* channel; (9) following the official channels on *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Telegram* and *X*; (10) getting a 'hamster' avatar, which is a non-fungible token (i. e. NFT); (11) personalizing the avatar with different outfits and weapons; (12) challenging other players in online multiplayer battles; (13) receiving $HMSTR tokens.

The idea behind *Hamster Kombat* was outlined in January 2024, when several developers wanted to create a game that combined (a) the action of mobile fighting games with (b) the security of blockchain technology. As a play-to-earn game (P2E), *Hamster Kombat* converts entertainment into work by promising players to reward them with crypto tokens that are convertible into real money. At the end of September 2024 there were more than 300 million players. Accordingly, in terms of numbers, this game surpassed massively multiplayer online role-playing games (i. e. MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft*, *Fallout 76*, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* and *Genshin Impact*.

The game had a noteworthy impact on the mobile gaming industry. It proved that blockchain technology could radically transform the processes associated with developing, publishing and playing games. The use of blockchain allowed developers to provide actual ownership of all the in-game assets to every player. They can earn, buy, sell and trade various types of items (e. g. NFTs) with transparency and security.

Blockchain has the advantage of being an easily verifiable system. It changed the manner in which players traded various values and assets. When this concept was combined with the idea of developing a small indie game, the result took the mobile gaming industry by storm. This was further simplified by three precursors: (a) *Telegram*'s 'mini-app' environment, which allows playing without downloading an app from *Apple Store* or *Google Play*; (b) the game *Notcoin*, which was launched in January 2024 and

airdropped one of the first in-game coins that could be transformed in real money via blockchain; (c) *TikTok*'s strategies to incentivise sharing (Wilser, 2024).

The viral character of the game is of interest, because memes are used to include events from real life into the game. Reality is simulated in a way meant to attract new players, reproducing events from the crypto market and creating crypto Easter eggs.

After the developers launched the $HMSTR crypto token on multiple platforms, the question that became prevalent among players was whether the game will be sustainable. Several of the crypto coins from the various similar past projects flopped (i.e. such as *Axie Infinity*). Accordingly, an argument could be made that *Hamster Kombat* has the potential to flop, due to the fickleness of its crypto token. Furthermore, there were claims that its token airdrop was a type of "time Ponzi scheme" (Wilser, 2024). On the other hand, one could argue that all cryptocurrencies are a type of accelerated Ponzi schemes. However, unlike other similar projects, *Hamster Kombat* benefits from multiple revenue channels: in-game ads, 18 *YouTube* channels, *Telegram* advertising shares and over 300 million members, which can be monetized.

*Hamster Kombat* is an application developed on *Telegram* as a Web 3.0 supporting platform. It has been compared to a digital "shopping mall" (Nage, 2024, as cited in Wilser, 2024). From an anthropological standpoint, just like other blockchain games and/or platforms, this game may represent a portal towards digital field sites for the anthropologists of the future. Blockchain games, NFT's and cryptocurrencies offer new possibilities for digital anthropologists. For example, anthropologists can "use blockchain to query globalization in its digital forms, the creation of new localisms through globally networked digital media, or the contests over digital commons and their enclosure" (Maurer, 2021, p. 200). Furthermore, if one considers blockchain as media, then there could be a resurgence of questions about (a) reproducibility, (b) replicability, (c) simulacra, and (d) new ethnographies of blockchain games.

## 3. *Hamster Kombat*: blockchain games in the age of digital 'simulacra of simulation'

The paper "Bitcoin: A peer-to-peer electronic cash system" (Nakamoto, 2008) opened a new world of possibility. This whitepaper described a new digital cash system that was envisioned to solve a series of challenges inherent to creating valuable digital artefacts. Interestingly, it also inaugurated a new type of publication, which could be of interest for digital anthropologists: the cryptocurrency "whitepaper" (Maurer, 2021, p. 201). The majority of blockchain projects are accompanied by whitepapers and *Hamster Kombat* makes no exception. It keeps with the Bitcoin blockchain's open source ethos: it is easily accessible and contains plans detailing the development of the game. However, unlike Nakamoto's whitepaper, these plans are subject to change from a version to another. As of September 2024, the current version is 0.3 (*Hamster Kombat*, 2024). This is relevant for anthropological discourse analysis, because "posting a whitepaper is akin to announcing one's existence and is almost a prerequisite for entering into the blockchain developer community" (Maurer, 2021, p. 201). In 2017, whitepapers of other projects came under regulatory examination, because they are meant to advertise a project in order to lobby investors. However, unlike them, *Hamster Kombat*'s whitepaper has the

function of advertising the project's relevance for its players, who are considered by the developers to be a type of investors.

In *Hamster Kombat*, the unique character of the avatars, the accounts, as well as the in-game digital property is guaranteed. It represents an advantage that is noticeable, when compared with the digital property from other online games. Managing crypto tokens derived from this game represents a 'simulacra of simulation'. The idea of bringing into a virtual world a unique artefact endowed with a singular value, launched in Bitcoin's whitepaper, represents an example of Baudrillard's third order of simulacra, which is "founded on information, the model, the cybernetic game-total operationality, hyperreality, aim of total control" (1981/ 2010, p. 121). Blockchain is a means of ensuring the uniqueness of each currency unit "right down to the very code on which it is built" (Maurer, 2021, p. 202). Therefore, instead of having an institution like a bank, *Hamster Kombat* has a distributed collection of nodes.

The interest manifested towards *Bitcoin* and blockchain in social sciences is correlated by Nancy Baym, Lana Swartz and Andrea Alarcon with the technoeconomic imaginaries that have been crystalized at the beginning of the 21st century. Blockchain is also a convening technology that bring together (a) money utopians, (b) artists, (c) investment bankers in the same place (Baym et al., 2019). In the case of *Hamster Kombat*, all these constituencies are joined by gamers.

*Hamster Kombat* is interesting for digital anthropologists, because it has been inspired by the blockchain frenzy of speculation. Furthermore, it is connected to the ideologies of disintermediation and populism. However, as Maurer asserts, blockchain is not a free-for-all. It entails a decentralized network of computational agents that creates a verifiable and unalterable version of the truth (2021, p. 212). Thus, the gamers' achievements are made permanent via blockchain.

## 4. *Hamster Kombat*: Perspectives on the anthropology of blockchain games

Anthropological perspectives about blockchain games entail approaching several challenges and concerns: (a) the nature of digital artefacts; (b) the politics of money; (c) the translation from entertainment to work; (d) the constant renegotiation of the commons; (e) the challenge of attaining digital authenticity. Delving into a blockchain game such as *Hamster Kombat* may prove to open a new type of ethnography, different from the existing approaches, such as Bella Dicks et al.'s hypermedia ethnography (2005, pp. 115–135). The nature of money and social life, the characteristics of entertainment and the meshing between leisure and work are opening up for debates topics which were unimaginable two decades ago.

The anthropological debates about 'data', 'analysis', 'fieldwork' and 'findings', which are predicated on positivist models of research do not reflect the complexity entailed by studying blockchain games. For example, the term 'data collection', which is associated with an integral stage in the fieldwork, entails the negative connotation of considering 'data' as being inert. The dynamics of a blockchain game makes such an appraisal unacceptable. Additionally, in the case of a game such as *Hamster Kombat*, there are several meanings associated with this term: (a) the anthropologist's field notes and/or

records; (b) information collected by the game; (c) elements observed and collected by the researcher.

As a construct, a blockchain game is blurring the conceptual sense of 'place' (Geertz, 1996, p. 262). Accordingly, the anthropological meanings associated with 'field' and 'fieldwork' become increasingly vague. My excursus contains assertions about the 'field' of research as an external emplacement, in a manner similar to Anna Vennonen's in-depth research about cryptocurrency and blockchain (2023). To identify the 'field', a digital anthropologist must take into consideration where are its limits. In the case of *Hamster Kombat*, the 'field' emplacement can be represented as a network of spaces, people, things and symbols. According to Jenna Burrel, the 'field' is constructed by the researcher who identifies the network (2009). Actually, in a blockchain game anthropologists create the 'field' while they experience it.

Participant observation in blockchain games is different from the method and the associated techniques envisioned by anthropologists in the past century. Aside from collecting data, and actively engaging with other members of the game's community, anthropologists find themselves in a paradoxical situation that is seldom emphasized: while exploring the places from the game, they also create digital emplacements and artefacts (e.g. NFTs) in a manner that is different from what would happen in a real-world place. Thus, in games such as *Hamster Kombat*, participant observation becomes 'experiential creation' in a manner that is similar to phenomenological 'worldbuilding' (Zigon, 2018, pp. 129–158). As a player, the anthropologist creates the game environment, at least one avatar and various artefacts.

The assets created or obtained in-game are an important dimension of players' gaming experience and engagement. For example, Gordon Kuo Siong Tan (2024) expounded the manner in which blockchain allows gamers to adapt their experience and increase their engagement by owning in-game assets. In his case study, Tan examined how players earn cryptocurrency in the game *Axie Infinity*, which later can be converted in fiduciary currency. The play-to-earn model (i.e. P2E) illustrated by Tan is not new. However, the blockchain-based precarity emphasized in his research is relevant, because it is associated with the engagement of players into broader cryptocurrency markets. Gaming becomes their livelihood. In turn, new informal economic, political and social relationships emerge. From an anthropological standpoint, Tan's study includes new insights into the ways in which entertainment is transformed into the "financialization of labour" (2024, pp. 1–7). He argues that P2E gaming causes a particular type of block-chain based precarity, which is determined by software code and "the sociotechnical reconfiguration of capital-labour relations in producing the precarious conditions experienced by player-workers" (2024, p. 10). This precarity is associated with the uncertainty generated by the volatility of *Axie* cryptocurrency. Thus, players' increasing engagement does not necessarily guarantee their financial success.

In my ongoing investigation of *Hamster Kombat*, I used case studies such as Tan's (2024), to gain a better understanding of the blockchain games' corpus of anthropological literature. This 'ensemble' of works is still in its formative stages. I am interested in the ways in which identity, ownership, transparency, decentralization shape the gaming experience of players.

According to Janet Salmons, 'unobtrusive observation' entails collecting information that is posted but not personally identifiable (2015). In this type of observation, researchers look for patterns in the collected information without creating posts, responding or involving themselves in any type of interactions with the online community. However, 'unobtrusive observation' has the notable limit that it is not truly 'unobtrusive': in anthropology, just like in other sciences, the simple observation of a phenomenon has the tendency to change it. The impact of this method on the observed phenomenon and subjects is actually intentionally reduced, not eliminated. Furthermore, Janet Salmons' claim that the data used is not identifiable, is debatable at best. While following the game's *Telegram* and *YouTube* channels, I did not include any personal identifiers. However, I found out that it was easy for another person to include data as comments into a browser and find personal details belonging to various community members. Elements of metadata might be attached, which could simplify the identification of the people whose posts have been included in the research. Consequently, I used mainly the data posted by the *Hamster Kombat* developers and compared their information with my in-game experience of creating the 'field' of study. Despite these limits, this article represents my first step towards conceptualising a new type of observation, which should be different from the method envisioned by anthropologists in the past century. In blockchain games, observation is neither truly 'participant', nor actually 'unobtrusive'.

In my study, I began by reviewing 30 press articles and posts that covered P2E focused on *Hamster Kombat*. I found these articles on various cryptocurrency news outlets, mainstream press, the game's whitepaper (2024), and the *Telegram* (Hamster Kombat, n.d.) and *YouTube* (Hamster Kombat, 2024) official channels. Afterwards, I performed content analysis on developers and players' comments collected from discussion threads on *Telegram* and *YouTube*. The anonymised comments were downloaded to an Excel file for inductive coding to identify emerging themes. At the time of editing this article, I used in-game observation to compare the analysis results with my own findings. In my article, I expound assertions based on current analysis and observation, which is mainly exploratory and 'unobtrusive', rather than 'participant'.

I came to understand that the methodological relativism, which became an integral part of anthropology in the last century, is nowadays challenged by blockchain developers' promise of a 'singular' truth. This involves a particular moral order, predicated on notions of society and economy as agoric: it is an "evocation of ancient Greek systems of political domination" (Maurer, 2021, p. 214). In the case of blockchain games, these notions determine a new type of factuality. On the *Telegram* platform players have a game that allows them to imagine the singularity of each of their NFT's and crypto tokens, which are made up of units of information that can be permanently recorded on a distributed ledger. Thus, digital artefacts become facts that can be available and eternal, in a vast virtual database held by all the players, which are also nodes in the blockchain. It allows multiple subsystems to coexist without the need for standardization. For example, in *Hamster Kombat* a player can engage in multiple apparently incompatible activities that offer the promise of crypto tokens and achievements, which in turn can be transformed into real money after the 26$^{th}$ of

September 2024 airdrop. The game epitomizes the ways in which alternative virtual and real economies can interoperate without a centralized system. The players become computational agents that can do many kinds of activities on blockchain for the promise of activating real rewards.

On blockchain, of particular interest for social scientists are the so-called 'smart contracts'. They represent executable code lines that activate when certain changes in the game meet specific requirements. For example, in *Hamster Kombat* when the code triggers confirm that the prerequisites necessary for attaining a certain number of $HMSTR tokens have been met, a smart contract can issue a payment without the involvement of any human or institution. Indirectly, smart contracts change the behaviour of the players, which was compared by some anthropologists with a form of "human and computational slavery" (Maurer, 2021, p. 215). This can become a topic of interest for new digital fieldwork.

## 5. Conclusion

Blockchain games such as *Hamster Kombat* represent a new way of transforming leisure into work in a more stable and permanent virtual environment. The blockchain has the apparent advantage of decentralization, the promise of recreating in virtual space agoric societies and economies that can coexist without standardization and the opportunity of speculative leisure. Through ethnography among players, digital anthropologists should not only study the new social and cultural realities entailed by this type of game, but also reconceptualize terms like 'data collection'.

The permanence of digital artefacts and the automaticity foreshadowed by smart contracts will generate new trends in the gaming industry. They do not signify the liberation of human labour (Maurer, 2021, p. 215). I assert that they may accelerate the slavery of human leisure. As a reservoir of human imagination and hope, blockchain has many unexpected similarities with Michel Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia' (1967/2008, p. 18). Blockchain can be simultaneously approached as a supercomputer, philosophical concept, asset, currency, tool, social movement, political cause, gaming platform, environment, research field, network, art gallery etc. It juxtaposes ideological trends associated with hacker culture. It entails the manifestation of hacker ethic on multiple decentralized networks. Accordingly, it is necessary to develop a new type of methodological approach and new tools to research it. Using an anthropological perspective to research blockchain games can help answer questions about the phenomena associated with cryptocurrency, especially those about the reasons behind the value of crypto tokens, which varies according to different cultural systems.

In *Hamster Kombat*, there is significant importance placed on the engagement of the player community. It entails a decentralized development process in which space is less relevant than time. As a blockchain game, it includes the permanence of transience: the completion of ephemeral tasks activates smart contracts that permanently award prizes. As a blockchain start-up, this game is somewhat antithetical to the 'traditional' representations of financial organizations. It entails an amalgamation of past and new practices, ideological concepts, speculative potential, digital artefacts, and a

decentralized community. In other words, it is a network of significance and a new hypostasis of culture.

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