A New Approach To Subculture: Gaming As A Substantial Subculture Of Consumption

By

Adam Meikle

207515893

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I, ..., declare that

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Abstract

The study identifies how serious gamers (those who play videogames) manifested themselves as an authentic contemporary subculture in South Africa. The research took place in Durban and extended to Johannesburg, over a two year period. The study reflected an interest in the community of lived experiences that developed around the acts of gaming, a subculture with its own interests, dynamics and boundaries that differentiated itself from others. Research was informed by a theoretical focus on the work of Paul Hodkinson (2002) that permitted the usage of a postmodern subcultural model of study that could be tailored to the analysis of gaming as a contemporary subculture. In conclusion, it was identified that gaming shares many traits with a "subculture of consumption", which is an authentic contemporary subculture, born out of the act of consumption of a mere product, much like a videogame (Schouten & McAlexander 1995; Arnould & Thompson 2005; Thompson & Troester 2002).

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1. Introduction

Nature Of Research Focus

The focus of this research thesis was to identify how serious 'hardcore' gamers, individuals who play videogames with a serious passion and dedication, manifested themselves as an authentic contemporary subculture in South Africa. Most of the research took place in Durban and extended into Johannesburg over a two year period, from 2011 to 2012. The study was not interested in games as texts, that is, their semiotic or other textual analysis to reveal their meanings and themes. Instead the research interest was vested in a community of lived experiences that developed around the acts of gaming (playing videogames), a subculture with its own interests, dynamics and boundaries that differentiated itself from others.

Anyone embarking upon research into a contemporary subculture is faced with two opposed schools: the "modernist" approach to subcultures seminally defined by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), the founding department of the discipline of cultural studies at the University of Birmingham (Hall & Jefferson 1975; Hebdige 1979), and the more recent "postmodernist" school (Thornton 1995; Bennett 1999; Muggleton 2000; Muggleton & Weinzierl 2003). The latter offered a sustained critique of the very foundations of the CCCS approach to the analysis of subcultures, and has much of value to say, but my own journey through these rival claims was intimately bound up with the data I was obtaining from my own qualitative ethnographic research, so that a dialectical process emerged where theoretical concepts and ethnographic data entered into dialogue with each other. This led to a theoretical focus on the work of Paul Hodkinson (2002) that permitted the usage of a postmodern subcultural model of study that could be tailored to the analysis of gaming as a contemporary subculture. In the process, it was identified that gaming shares many traits with a "subculture of consumption", which is an authentic

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contemporary subculture, born out of the act of consumption of a mere product, much like a videogame (Schouten & McAlexander 1995; Arnould & Thompson 2005; Thompson & Troester 2002). In summary, this research thesis is an empirical investigation into the nature of gaming as a contemporary subculture in South Africa.

What Is Gaming?

Firstly, what needs to be defined is what exactly a videogame is, and in the broadest possible sense a videogame can be defined as:

> any forms of computer-based entertainment software, either textual or image-based, using any electronic platform such as personal computers or consoles and involving one or multiple players in a physical or networked environment (Frasca 2001: 4).

Videogames are marked by "fostering a sense of first-hand participation" in a game world generated by either a computer or a videogame console (Newman 2004: 27). Videogames offer the player, the gamer, other experiences such as: "combinations of chance, competition, role-play and kinaesthetic pleasures" (Newman 2004: 28). Videogame play, or the act of gaming (playing) with a videogame, can be seen as "exploratory, open and free-roaming just as it can be puzzle-oriented and rule-based" interactions with the medium (Newman 2004: 28).

Defining the players of videogames, gamers, is as ambiguous as the term "videogames", and James Newman (2004) argues that it is difficult "delineating the audience". To conceptualise the "gamer", the person playing the game, we can divide gamers into two primary groupings: (1) *hardcore* gamers, players who are immensely dedicated to playing videogames for long durations of time and make up the *core* audience of gamers and gaming culture; (2) *casual* gamers who play videogames on a casual basis and are not directly embedded in gaming culture. Gamers have often been referred to as "videogamers" and "videogame players". However, the common usage term within the gaming subculture,

in reference to players of videogames, is "gamers". Terms that are constantly used to refer to videogames range from variations of "videogames" to "video games", to "electronic games", to "games" and "digital games", and can refer to games in arcades, on gaming consoles played through a television, and those played on a computer in offline and online capacities (Raessens & Goldstein 2005: xii). One finds that many of the terms are interchangeable. As such, in this thesis the term "videogames" and "games" are employed interchangeably in place of all these varied terms, in order to maintain consistency throughout the rest of the chapters that follow.

Why Study Gaming?

A statistical survey, in 2011, conducted by the ESA (Entertainment Software Association) revealed that 72% of American households play videogames, with the average age of a gamer being 37. The spread of videogames in America alone sufficiently demonstrates the reach of the medium, and highlights its importance as a field of study. The argument that claims to undermine the importance of videogames, as an artefact worthy of study, is that some academics position it as a trivial media form not worthy of in-depth analysis and study (Newman 2004: 13), a conservative response not uncommon with regard to popular culture generally. To the unseasoned individual, videogames may appear "impenetrably complex and monotonous", and incomprehensible (Newman 2004: 13).

However, videogames have evolved beyond the simple capacities of the arcade with the birth of the gaming console (such as the *PlayStation 3*, *Xbox 360* and *Nintendo Wii*). Videogames have become more accessible, and are no longer niche, and it is through the playing of videogames that the meaning of the games are revealed (Newman 2004: 13). Videogames' social importance is clearly evident. In the academic world, there are few scholarly texts on videogames and no comprehensive critical history of video games and the gaming subculture. This is in contrast to the strong academic focus on the history and analysis of computer-mediated communications (Murphy 2004: 228). The lack of critical scholarship of videogames and the gaming subculture is hard to understand when the field

is huge, due to the size of the videogames industry and its mass appeal in modern society (Murphy 2004: 229).

In recent years, games have obtained cultural value and offer social merit to the players (known as gamers). Videogames can now be considered culture as Frans Mayra (2008: 22) argues:

> It is meaningful today to talk about games being culture because of their high – or at least rising – artistic qualities. Games can offer their players experiences that range from the aesthetic pleasures of impressive graphics, music, storylines and (sometimes) well-scripted dialogue. Many games also provide players with active experiences that are more akin to sports to the tests of skill, strategy, strength or endurance that are typical of some sports.

Videogames and videogame playing practices do have significance for people (gamers) who are actively engaged with videogames (Mayra 2008: 23). They define many hardcore gamers' lives and how they actively pursue their interest in gaming. Studies referring to the subcultural notion of videogames are few in the searches conducted by this researcher. Studies of videogames and its associated culture have been primarily focused on the cultural and social effects of videogames. What is noteworthy in the context of the study of videogame culture is the lack of focus on the *actual players* of videogames (gamers) who play videogames regularly as a cultural grouping definitively differentiated from other cultural groupings.

The field of game studies, referring to studies involving videogames, is in its infancy and can be classified as an emergent field. As a result, most of the field's studies are recent in publication. Essentially, there is no established body of knowledge. The perspective this study will take is largely the view of "games as culture" (Mayra 2008: 2). There are three intersecting factors inherent in taking such a perspective, which are important to the study of "games as culture". These three factors are: (1) the study of videogames, (2) the study of players, and (3) the study of the *contexts* of the previous two (which can be represented quite clearly by Figure 1.1).
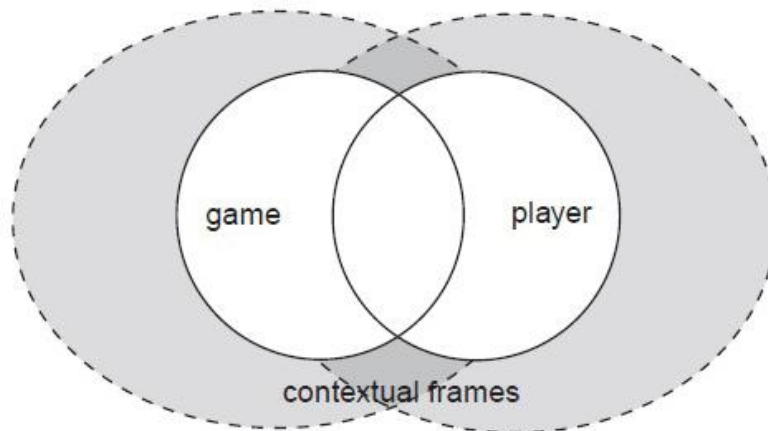
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Figure 1.1 The focus of game studies in the interaction between game and player, informed by their various contextual frames.

Source: Mayra, F. 2008. 2.

Contexts here, refers to the interactive relationship and interconnectedness culturally and socially between players (gamers) and their medium (videogames) (Mayra, 2008: 2). The focus of this dissertation's research will involve the interconnectedness of *contexts*, the relationship between people and videogames, leading to the creation of a gaming subculture.

However, what needs to be noted is that due to the burgeoning nature of game studies as a field, and the relative lack of any coherent structure to the field, the field itself is flexibly multidisciplinary. Both Mark Wolf and Bernard Perron (2003: 2) argue that:

> The video game is now considered as everything from the ergodic (work) to the Ludic (play); as a narrative, simulation, performance, remediation, and art; a potential tool for education or an object of study for behavioural psychology; as a playground for social interaction; and of course, as a toy and a medium of entertainment. Likewise, the emerging field of video game theory is itself a convergence of a wide variety of approaches including film and television theory, semiotics, performance theory, narratology, aesthetics and art theory, psychology, theories of simulacra, and others.

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One example of the multidisciplinary nature of game studies is the work of Tom Boellstorf who discusses how anthropological approaches can contribute significantly to the multidisciplinary nature of game studies. Boellstorf argues that each academic discipline has its own "pivot" term which defines the exact focus of that discipline:

> It seems that every discipline creates a pivot term that it cannot do without: biologists need *life*, historians need *history*, psychologists need the *psyche*. Disciplines are often marked by discussions about pivot terms: What counts as life? Can we have women's studies without assuming a category "woman"? Even though such discussions rarely resolve all debate, they often result in better methodologies and theoretical frameworks (2006: 30).

Boellstorf extrapolates from this that anthropology cannot do without the pivot term of "culture". He says that the moniker of *games and culture* (which is also the name of the journal the article is from) reflects the nature of game studies which uses *culture* as a secondary pivot term, with the primary pivot term being *games*, or videogames in a more general sense. His (2006: 30) central argument is that the study of anthropology can provide game studies with a way in which to theorise *culture*, and provide the methodology of "participant observation" for the investigation of the relationship between videogames and culture.

As such, Boellstorf (2006: 33) proposes three futures for game studies: Game cultures; Cultures of gaming; The gaming of cultures. *Game cultures* is a strain which would investigate the videogame as a cultural form "in its own right", by examining the relationship of the world inside of the videogame with that of the physical world through participants' playing habits. Some may take this a step further and examine a particular videogame as its own cultural system with cultural meanings and practices innate to that videogame. *Cultures of gaming* implies the study of videogames as emergent cultures with a range of factors, and various subcultures relative to a genre of videogame, franchise or style of videogame. My own research study is located within this prospective paradigm. This future paradigm could lead to cross-cultural comparison of a number of videogame genres, titles and subcultures. *The gaming of cultures* situates game studies in a branch of study that would involve research into the effects of gaming in mainstream society as,

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"gaming increasingly affects the whole panoply of interactive media, from television to movies to cell phones to the internet in all its incarnations" (Boellstorf 2006: 33). Understanding this process means one would be able to understand how cultures around the world are being shaped by gaming.

Conclusively, the nature of the field is one which is multidisciplinary. This means that many academic perspectives are welcome in game studies. All of these different perspectives help to provide a broader picture of the cultural and social value of videogames. Videogames are an important part of society, and research into gaming as a contemporary subculture is valid.

Outline of Chapters

The chapters that will follow explore a variety of areas, all in the pursuit of identifying gaming as a contemporary subculture in South Africa. Below is the outline for the rest of the research thesis, which is summarised as follows:

- **Theoretical Framework**: An analysis of the backlog of CCCS subcultural theory, as represented by Dick Hebdige (1979). Following this, there is an exploration of alternative postmodern subcultural theory including the "subculture of consumption" and Paul Hodkinson's recent study of goths (2002).
- **Methodology**: Various qualitative methodologies utilised in the research process are explained and the chapter elaborates upon how each research method was adapted for specific situations, when necessitated.
- **Thematic Analysis**: Data collected is analysed according to the model of Hodkinson (2002), with some adaptations. All the data was broken down into sections according to specific themes pertaining to the validation of gaming as a contemporary subculture in South Africa.

- **Conclusion**: Final conclusions are drawn from the data discussed, and the thesis addresses what can be determined about gaming as a contemporary subculture in South Africa.

2. Theoretical Framework

Introduction

Gaming for gamers is a type of symbolic work in which *gamers produce social meanings out of their gameplay.* This can be explained by Willis's concept of 'symbolic creativity'. It can be defined as the cultural significance created from 'symbolic work' where individuals seek to establish their presence, identity and meaning through the creative use of signs and symbols. The 'symbolic work' which generates 'symbolic creativity' is what constitutes a subculture (Willis 1990: 206). 'Symbolic creativity' is therefore a part of "everyday human activity", a part of necessary work, which is made up of the daily production and reproduction of human existence, utilising symbolic resources including signs and symbols (the raw material) to produce meanings The signs and symbols can include the language a subculture uses, their texts, song, films, images and "artefacts of all kinds" (Willis 1990: 207). Life according to Willis (1990: 208) is saturated in symbolic work where we negotiate the world around us through the use of the imagination, and in turn he believes that the "imaginative is self-validating" and that our lives are nothing more than "Art". "Symbolic creativity" can therefore be more fully realised as a practice which involves the production of new meanings by individuals (or collectively the subculture) which is "intrinsically" attached to feeling, to energy, to excitement and "psychic movement" (Willis 1990: 208). The practice of "symbolic creativity" in gaming can be seen as an "all-embracing and inclusive notion of the living arts" in which the individual gamer can be transformed and is able to produce "specific forms" of human identity and capacities for meaning-making (Willis 1990: 208). These are inherent in a subculture such as gaming where the medium itself is pervaded by signs and symbols which each individual gamer internalises.

Anyone embarking upon research into a contemporary subculture is faced with two opposed schools: the "modernist" approach to subcultures seminally defined by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), the founding department of the discipline of cultural studies at the University of Birmingham (Hall & Jefferson 1975; Hebdige 1979), and the more recent "postmodernist" school (Thornton 1995; Bennett 1999; Muggleton 2000; Muggleton & Weinzierl 2003). The latter offered a sustained critique of the very foundations of the CCCS approach to the analysis of subcultures, and has much of value to say, but my own journey through these rival claims was intimately bound up with the data I was obtaining from my own qualitative ethnographic research, so that a dialectical process emerged where theoretical concepts and ethnographic data entered into dialogue with each other. The results of that interaction generated the theoretical paradigm I eventually found to be most useful for my own research, which I outline at the end of this chapter, after examining the rival claims of the "modernist" and "postmodernist" approaches. It is, however, necessary to begin this theoretical chapter by examining closely the present day relationship between the social categories of the "economic" and the "cultural", both of which are vital for any understanding of contemporary subcultures.

For Don Slater (1997: 8), consumer culture "denotes a social arrangement in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, is mediated through markets". It is, that is, not only a consumer economy, but a market-mediated *culture*, where the citizens of contemporary societies live out their meanings and subjectivities. In their seminal work on the "anthropology of consumption", Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1979: 38) argue that:

> Instead of supposing that goods are primarily needed for subsistence plus competitive display, let us assume that *they are needed for making visible and stable the categories of culture*. It is standard ethnographic practice to assume that all material possessions carry social meanings and to concentrate a main part of cultural analysis upon their use as communicators.

Material goods made by capitalist corporations for the motive of profit are dignified by their vocation to communicate culture. Scott Lash and John Urry (1994: 64) identify the "blurred" contemporary division between the economy and culture, and Paul du Gay (1997: 3-5) identifies a new "cultural economy", with the economic sphere "thoroughly saturated with culture". Not only are global entertainment corporations like *Sony* and *Time Warner* selling "culture" on an unprecedented scale, but increasingly goods are "aestheticized", encrusted with cultural meanings by the "cultural intermediaries" of advertising and marketing. Jean Baudrillard (1975) wrote of "sign-value" replacing "use" and "exchange" value, so that what we actually purchase is not some functional object, but cultural *meanings* in a game of status and prestige. Hence also his "commodity-sign", which helpfully captures the processes of advertising itself, because, as Grant McCracken (1986) argued, advertisers transfer meaning from the "culturally constituted world" to consumer goods, and what the consumer therefore buys are those *cultural* meanings with which the products are now associated: we purchase not the cigarette, but the masculinity.

For Pierre Bourdieu (1984), social distinctions are not explained solely by economic differentiation, but by the differing cultural "tastes" of social classes which are materialized in what (material and symbolic) goods you buy and do not buy. And indeed if we look for the central impetus behind contemporary consumption, it is in the self-fashioning of *identity*, as Robert Bocock (2002: 67) explains:

> Consumption has become an active process involving the symbolic construction of a sense of both collective and individual identities. This sense of identity should no longer be seen as given to people by membership of a specific economic class, or social status group, or directly by ethnicity or gender. Identities have to be actively constructed by more and more people for themselves. In this process of active identity construction, consumption has come to play a central role.

For Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash (1994), the traditional institutional machinery of identity production is weakening in our period of "reflexive modernity", and ordinary people are therefore obliged to take on the responsibility of reflexively fashioning their identities, and, as we have seen, they generally do so through consumption.

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These cultural and economic developments have also shifted the focus of cultural studies, as Angela McRobbie (1992: 730) pointed out:

> Identity could be seen as dragging cultural studies into the 1990s by acting as a kind of guide to how people see themselves, not as class subjects, not as psychoanalytic subjects, not as subjects of ideology, not as textual subjects, but as active agents whose sense of self is projected onto and expressed in an expansive range of cultural practices, including texts, images, and commodities.

For the modernist Frankfurt School in the earlier part of the last century, popular culture was a terrain colonised by a monopoly capitalism where the "mass" audience or consumer was ideologically duped into a passive acceptance of capitalist reality. It was precisely the merging of the economic and the cultural that was the problem: the former stripped the ("popular") latter of its vital critical function, turning art into vacuous entertainment that obliterated the ability to think beyond the horizon of the present. Abandoning popular culture as an irremediable catastrophe, the Frankfurt School sought solace in a "high culture" where the critical spirit was still to be found (Wade 2005: 228-244).

However, from our more recent postmodern perspective, ordinary people are no longer considered, as McRobbie (1992) showed, to be the unwitting products of determining structures, but are instead understood as "active consumers" or "active audiences" *reflexively acting upon* reality – and this includes popular culture - and themselves. The meaning of "consumption" therefore shifts from its almost entirely derogatory meaning, with its suggestions of mindless manipulation, to a much more nuanced appreciation of the complex role that consumption plays in everyday *culture* as a way not only of materializing culture, but also of fabricating subjectivities. The rigid division between the economic and the cultural is simply no longer tenable: to understand economics, understand how culture works.

Indeed, Fiske (1989: 26) has argued – against a reductive political economy approach to culture that assumes consumerist victimization by capitalism - that there are two parallel semi-autonomous economies, which he calls the *financial* economy and the *cultural*

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economy. The *financial* economy produces and distributes commodities for profit and constructs the subject position of the subjected consumer. The *cultural* economy however is what happens to commodities (including symbolic commodities) after capitalism has made its profits. Here the commodity is integrated into the culture of the audiences' everyday lives (or actively ignored if it is culturally unsuitable) by being "man-handled" and appropriated and *re-signified*, thus establishing and developing popular culture. What is important is what audiences *do* with commodities - and for Fiske it is most often giving commodities resistant meanings (in the tradition of CCCS) against the interests of the elite who manufacture them. The teenager wears her jeans to ruin to protest against the capitalist logic of fashion obsolescence. Ordinary people, for Fiske (1989: 28), treat a commodity as:

> A cultural resource, pluralize meanings and pleasures it offers, evade or resist its disciplinary efforts, fracture its homogeneity and coherence, raid or poach upon its terrain.

For the purposes of this thesis, what gamers *do* with video games is build a subculture around them, generating their own subcultural meanings in a "cultural economy" autonomous of the interests of those whose sole interest in video games is to produce and distribute them for a profit. It is in this light that we can speak of a "subculture of consumption" which John Schouten and James McAlexander (1995: 43) define as "a distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity". They continue that "people identify with certain objects or consumption activities and, through those objects or activities, identify with other people" (Schouten and McAlexander 1995: 48). Their focus is the Harley Davidson motorcycle, and the subcultural sociality that is voluntarily formed around it and its deeply-held cultural meanings, such as that of American outlaw freedom.

The focus of my thesis is the gaming subculture in South Africa, a "distinctive subgroup" with a "shared commitment" to (the consumption act of) gaming, and a contemporary one where the "economic" (the games, the gaming platforms, the computer hardware, the online gaming, the gaming magazines, the t-shirts, the conventions, etc.) and the "cultural"

(the meanings and sociality constructed by gamers in *interactive* relation to both games and other gamers) constantly "blur" into each other. This is not therefore a modernist refusal of the economic (capitalism), but a postmodern active *using* of capitalist commodities and the media to assemble and sustain an autonomous (sub-) cultural environment.

Subculture Theory

I will critically examine the CCCS approach by confining myself to Hebdige's seminal *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). His argument largely rested on an examination of the original punk movement in the late 1970s. He argued that a youth subculture can be seen as a type of "noise", a semiotic and cultural resistance disrupting the social normality of the hegemonic order. It can become "an actual mechanism of semantic disorder" creating a "blockage in the system of representation" (Hebdige 1979: 355). This is achieved through "spectacular style" (a specific way of dressing, appearance, playing music, talking, designing fanzines, etc.). Style is indicative of the differentiation of a subcultural grouping from mainstream society; punks, for example, appropriated everyday commodities and re-signified them in aberrant, counter-hegemonic ways. He argued further that these "distinctive rituals of consumption, through style" allow the subculture to reveal "its 'secret' identity and communicate its forbidden meanings". Subcultures are defined by group identity, with strong boundary maintenance, stylistic homogeneity within the membership of a subculture, and with a high degree of commitment from members, their very spectacular style ensuring a clear line between themselves and outsiders (Muggleton 2000: 52). There was a strong dose of CCCS Marxist theory at work in Hebdige's analysis: subcultures were made up of working-class youth, and authenticated themselves through their symbolic acts of resistance to the dominant capitalist system.

For Hebdige (1979: 356), subcultures are eventually "incorporated" into the dominant cultural paradigm through two ways. Firstly, this is achieved through the conversion of sub-cultural signs into mass-produced objects (commodities): punk fashion is sold on the

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High Street. Secondly, there is a re-labelling and re-definition of deviant behaviour by the mainstream media in order to ideologically incorporate the subculture into dominant meanings: newspapers begin carrying stories of happy punk nuclear families. Now absorbed by the consumer culture of capitalism to which they were unremittingly hostile, subcultures like punks become a parody of themselves, their erstwhile signs of rebellion now empty fashionable and profitable gestures.

Sarah Thornton (1995: 104) pioneered the usage of the concept "subcultural capital", which can be defined as the pertinent cultural knowledge necessary for members to acquire in order to obtain legitimacy within a subculture. She defines subcultural capital as "a currency which correlates with and legitimizes unequal statuses" (Thornton 1995: 104). She drew attention to the internal *hierarchies* present in contemporary subcultures, in her case club culture, determined by the possession of subcultural capital. In other words, far from being revolutionary enclaves a lá CCCS, subcultures actually contained their own hierarchies and inequalities of power, most notably around being an "insider" or on the fringes, and around being in possession of arcane subcultural knowledge of which outsiders are ignorant. Those in possession of large amounts of subcultural capital in effect policed the boundaries of the subculture, deciding who was "in" and who was "out".

The "massification" of gaming in recent years has led to the rise of different types of gamers. Frans Mayra (2008: 27) argues that there exists (a) the *casual* gamer, a person who invests time into playing one specific game, type of game style, or genre of game; and (b) the *hardcore* gamer who embraces gaming culture to the fullest and in many cases is involved in its social aspects (online and offline), and also differs from the casual gamer in the intensity of their dedication to gaming. The gaming subculture I researched is made up of these second "hardcore" gamers who, as we shall see, also consciously differentiate themselves from the more casual gaming masses. If subcultures traditionally separate themselves from the "mainstream", then "mainstream" for hardcore gamers largely means the casual gamer. It is the "hardcore" gamer who engages in establishing and defending hierarchies of subcultural capital.

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Incidentally, although Thornton herself does not explore this point, her notion of subcultural capital has the potential of contributing constructively to moving beyond the often-heard paradox of subculturalists: that their rejection of mainstream uniformity ironically leads to a subcultural uniformity. While the relative uniformity of a subculture can be explained by its founding necessity sharply to differentiate itself from "mainstream" or "mass" society, (as Thornton (1995: 111) points out, the "othering" of the mainstream populous contributes to the feeling of community and a sense of shared identity within the underground club subcultures she examines), what Thornton's concept allows us to see is that, through an internal hierarchical culture, a certain *individualism* can flourish. The youth with a large quantity of esoteric club music knowledge draws attention to himself as – and is recognized as - "different" or "special", because more knowledgeable, more of a hard-core clubber than others. He stands out within the subculture, as would, to offer another example, a goth whose Saturday night outfit is strikingly original (or rather is a strikingly original "play" with goth dress codes). In other words, individualisation is dependent (as it also often is in "mainstream" society) upon the quantity of subcultural capital possessed by the subculturalists.

Furthermore, Thornton pointed out, far from being determinedly (working-) class conscious, the clubbers she researched saw themselves as "classless", temporarily free as youths from the pernicious British class structure.

Finally, Thornton importantly argued, Hebdige's study, with its assumption that the media and commerce only intervened at the end to kill off a subculture, was unable to provide proper assessment of the essential role of the media and commerce from the very beginning of a subculture's life:

> The idea that authentic culture is somehow outside media and commerce is a resilient one. In its full-blown romantic form, the belief suggests that grassroots cultures resist and struggle with a colonizing mass-mediated corporate world. At other times, the perspective lurks between the lines, inconspicuously informing parameters of research, definitions of culture and judgments of value (Thornton 1995: 116).

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She showed how various media play strongly supportive roles in the growth of a subculture, from enabling communication between subculturalists to producing a defining coherence to the subculture. With regard to Hebdige's punks, we can for example point to the important role that Malcolm McLaren and Vivien Westwood's Chelsea clothes shop played in the emergence of punk style (it did not spontaneously appear from the streets), and indeed in the emergence of punk's leading band, *The Sex Pistols* (who were assembled by McLaren himself, partly to promote his "punk" clothing style), whose music was also distributed by major record companies. For Thornton, and postmodern subculture theorists generally, Hebdige's "romantic" narrative of anti-capitalist resistance from a youthful force initially outside of its ambit (and for Hebdige punks are also seen through an "avant-garde outsider" lens), is both necessary to his Marxist analysis and greatly misleading. My own work on gaming found Thornton's insights to be particularly helpful, since the subculture is defined primarily by a medium – videogames - which is fuelled by commerce. With gaming, capitalism and consumption and the media are there right from the beginning.

A further postmodern criticism of the CCCS approach stems from the fact that the approach cannot effectively deal with the gap between scientific constructs (theoretical models) applied by academics and the "common sense reality of social actors" , whose crucial subjective views and meanings can only be accessed through qualitative ethnographic research (entirely ignored by Hebdige) (Muggleton 2000: 11). Instead, a Marxist/Semiotic model is (rigidly) imposed upon the subculture: typically the approach identifies a historical problem faced by the working class, and semiotically "decodes the political and ideological meanings of the subcultural response" (Muggleton 2000: 12). Hebdige's modernist reliance on High Theory portrays the punk subculture in the light of political struggle when arguably that resistance may have not been apparent to the punks themselves. Punks, perhaps, saw their subcultural groups more as "casual friendship networks" than resistance movements that were created to oppose the dominant cultural paradigm, and societal authority (Crawford and Rutter 2006: 153). Hebdige's (1979: 148) commitment to working class struggle is glaringly revealed when Hebdige excludes middle-class hippies from the definition of subculture, an elision glaringly pointed to by J. Patrick Williams (2011: 87) who in a recent book on subcultural studies described hippies

as "the twentieth century's most salient, and arguably greatest, representation of subcultural resistance".

The final batch of postmodern concepts I found useful emerges from the "post-structuralism" of postmodern theory, which is to say its stress upon the *limits* of structures: that systems are far less stable than they appear, that they are not internally homogenous but more usually trying repressively to contain a multitude of heterogeneous energies, and that a more useful metaphor for our times is that of fluidity and flow. We live in a "highly elaborated social structure", where individuals are constantly realigning their social allegiances into different formations, and where people form "cultural allegiances with different, not to say contradictory, social groups" whilst carrying on their lives (Fiske 1989: 24-30). Muggleton (2000: 20-34) notes that the fundamental flaw of the CCSS approach is in not fathoming the importance of the mobility of contemporary subcultures, and instead providing portraits of rather static structures (social class; subcultures), and where moreover, the individual is deemed irrelevant and is rather argued to be representative of the whole subculture. As a result, homogeneity and the monolithic are emphasised, disregarding the heterogeneous nature of subculturalists:

> The subculture concept seems to be little more than a cliché, with its implications that both 'subculture' and the parent culture against which it is are coherent and homogenous formations that can be clearly demarcated. But contemporary youth cultures are characterized by far more complex stratifications than that suggested by the simple dichotomy of 'monolithic mainstream' – 'resistant subcultures' (Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003: 7).

The simple binary model (with its obvious political implications) of mainstream/subculture can be usefully deconstructed because it ignores the complex ways in which individuals can be at once in and outside the "mainstream" (a secretary who becomes a goth on Saturday night), and the extent – fascinatingly – that a particular subculture can be aggressively different from the "mainstream" in some aspects but not others (hence Thornton's concept of subcultural capital and its necessary hierarchy). At the same time, the "mainstream" itself can be influenced in places by a subculture (consider for example

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how the 1960s hippie subculture has re-written much of the Californian life-style, or how the ecological movement has in recent years gone "mainstream" as the "ethical consumer").

In a similar light, membership of contemporary subcultures was seen to be "fluid" (Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003), and thus it was argued the CCCS approach is ineffective in assessing the fluidity of the membership and structure in contemporary subcultures. Bennett (1999) was one of the first academics to write about this fallacy and address it with his concept of "Neo-Tribes". Bennett adapted Maffesoli's concept of *tribus* (tribes) and applied it to youth involved in the dance scene in Britain, and argued that these groupings which had previously been understood as "coherent subcultures" were something else entirely. Rather he argues they are to be understood as a "series of temporal gatherings characterised by fluid boundaries and floating memberships" (Bennett 1999: 600). Postmodern subcultures thus have these qualities: membership is defined by sense of fragmented identity; members have transient attachment to the subculture with a lower degree of commitment; and have multiple stylistic identities. As such, there is stylistic heterogeneity within these subcultures, with weak boundary maintenance for the membership, a higher rate of mobility for members, and members who are concerned with the "surface" of style and image (Muggleton 2000: 52).

The gaming subculture's own membership is loose and fluid, not bounded by traditional conceptions of subculture such as the punk movement as described by Hebdige, where rigid structure is apparent (Mayra 2008: 25). There is enormous difficulty in defining exactly what the gaming subculture is when using the CCCS approach (Mayra 2008: 25). Consequently, the gaming subculture fits well into the post-subculture notion of present day subcultures that are fluid and do not follow the traditional conception of a subculture (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003: 7).

In my field-work while observing and interviewing gamers, I found most of the postmodern critique of the CCCS model convincing, and I rejected the following CCCS concepts: the Marxist theory of youth working-class resistance to capitalism (there was no evidence in

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my research of anti-capitalist militancy, or any social class identification as gamers, while the average age of a gamer in the USA is 37 years old (ESA 2013): this is not exclusively a youth subculture). The notion that subcultures necessarily focused on "spectacular style" (this obviously was not what gaming was about); that authentic subcultures are outside of commerce and the media (gamers belong precisely to a "subculture of consumption" focused on the media products called games); and the notion that subcultures were rigidly structured and homogenous (my research revealed a wide subcultural heterogeneity were also rejected. The gaming subculture has a varied membership, and because of the nature of the gaming industry, which produces a multiplicity of titles, within different genres, there are many different groupings of people around these many titles and genres).

In recent decades, consumer culture has expanded dramatically, its growth greatly assisted by globalisation (Muggleton 2000: 30). Therefore, it is inevitable that a subculture may arise from the trenches of modern consumerism, where both media and commerce intersect (Muggleton 2000: 57). Videogames are a prime example of this trend. Gaming can be viewed as an authentic contemporary subculture, born out of the act of consumption of a mere product, which is the videogame. One could helpfully describe gaming as a "subculture of consumption" (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Arnould and Thompson 2005; Thompson and Troester 2002), as we earlier did. Thus, through the pursuit of common consumption interests participants in a subculture of consumption create distinctive, yet at the same time fragmented, subcultures of consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2005: 873). The networks of "meanings and practices" that characterise a subculture of consumption are not fixed in a "particular set of socioeconomic circumstances" which is reflected in the membership (Thompson and Troester 2002: 553).

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The differences between the modernist and postmodernist subcultural models is helpfully captured by this diagram:

Modern Subcultures	Postmodern Subcultures
1. Is defined by group identity.	1. Is defined by fragmented identity.
2. Subculture has strong boundary maintenance.	2. Subculture has weak boundary maintenance.
3. Stylistic homogeneity within membership.	3. Stylistic heterogeneity within membership.
4. There are high degrees of commitment.	4. There are low degrees of commitment.
5. From within the subculture, emanates the "main" identity for subculturalists.	5. Within type of subculture, there exist multiple stylistic identities for subculturalists.
6. Membership in the subculture is perceived as "permanent".	6. Transient attachment to the subculture is expressed by members.
7. Within the subculture, are low rates of subcultural mobility, not moving from scene to scene.	7. Within this subculture, are high rates of subcultural mobility, and members can move from scene to scene.
8. Membership is stressed on beliefs and values.	8. In comparison, membership is concerned with style and image.
9. Much of the subcultural activity is purposed as a political gesture of resistance.	9. Subculturalists share apolitical sentiments.
10. Membership shares anti-media sentiments.	10. Membership shares positive attitude towards the media.
11. Self-perception of members as part of an authentic modern subculture.	11. Celebration by members of being in an authentic postmodern subculture.

Source: Muggleton, D. 2000. 52

New Model of Subcultural Analysis

However, my ethnographic research also threw up a problem with the postmodern approach to subcultures, and this was to do with what I take to be an excessive reaction to the highly structured notion of subculture one found with Hebdige/CCCS: the new affirmation was not only a stress on "fluidity", but also on *superficiality* and *ephemerality*, with subculturalists flitting from one slightly interesting subculture to another like television channel hopping, and never seriously committing to any. It was all skating erratically across the surface of a "depthless" postmodernism, as if the fashion industry, with its endless dedication to an empty novelty, had now ironically provided the very model for postmodern subculturalism. In my interviews with gamers, I discovered quite the opposite, that the subcultural commitment to gaming was treated very seriously by the members of the gaming subculture.

My theoretical research drew me to the recent work of Hodkinson (2002) on the goth subculture. Hodkinson's model offers what seems to me to be an entirely helpful theoretical compromise between the "modernist" and "postmodernist" subcultural schools. This had the virtue of allowing research to focus on what Hodkinson calls subcultural "substance" – the depth of *commitment* to the subculture and its activities by its members, as he points out:

> But in spite of overlaps and complexities, the initial temptation to describe goths using a term such as *neo-tribe* or *lifestyle* was gradually tempered by the realization that such a move would have over-inflated the diversity and instability of their grouping (2002: 29).

Hodkinson allows the researcher to examine subcultures born out of modern consumerism, which have distinctive values that set them apart as "authentic" subcultures.

His subcultural concepts are also useful for subcultures which have a global membership. Therefore gaming as an authentic contemporary subculture, entrenched in a paradigm of

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modern consumerism, has a shared "translocal sense of identity" within its membership (Hodkinson 2002: 28). This means simply that the membership of the gaming subculture is global, and that many of the qualities and values shared by South African gamers are similar to those found abroad. A contemporary subculture would have to be understood as "translocal" (Hodkinson 2002: 28). This is contrary to the nature of the understanding of traditional subculture, as most often subcultures were tied to specific locales, at specific moments in time. However, the reality is that globalisation has changed the way in which subcultural dissemination operates. Therefore, it was necessary to identify comparable "consistent and distinctive sets of tastes and values" across the whole gaming subculture to understand how the subculture operates on the local, and national, level.

Hodkinson (2002: 28) proposes a model which identifies "translocal cultural groupings of substance" with "substance" referring to the criteria relevant to proclaiming the authenticity of a contemporary subculture. Hodkinson also abandoned the Hebdige/CCCS emphasis on political resistance through "semiotic warfare" and its allied working-class focus, as well as the necessary subversion of consumer culture, and rather concentrated on identifying what makes a subculture "substantial". He favours his own model entitled the "Four Indicators of (Sub)Cultural Substance" which conceptualises such cultural substance, yet does not entail any major return to traditional forms of subcultural theory.

Hodkinson (2002: 29) found it difficult to categorise goths because of their stylistic diversity, dynamism, non-absolute boundaries and their varied levels of commitment. Additionally, he found their spontaneous creative practices and usage of external (and internal) networks of information and organisation involving media and commerce perplexing. Crucially, fluidity and substance are not matters of binary opposition, but of "degree".

His central theme of "cultural substance" is broken down into four indicative criteria of consistent distinctiveness, identity, commitment, and autonomy (Hodkinson 2002: 29-30). As these four criteria will be central to my ethnographic field-work, where they will enable

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me to define the nature of the gaming subculture, I will explain each of the criteria in some detail.

Consistent Distinctiveness

The criterion of "consistent distinctiveness" is the necessity for an "authentic" subculture to have *a set of shared tastes and values which are distinctive from those of other groups*. These shared distinctive values must also be reasonably consistent across all members of the subculture from various locations, to the past and present forms of the community. However, the reality of any research study means that there are limitations: time progression differences are quite difficult to measure around gaming in South Africa with the limited research period. Ultimately, one has to accept internal variation among members of a subculture, and variable changes over time.

When gaming is considered it is obvious that there is internal variation among all gamers with no apparent consistent style or image to differentiate them from other cultural groupings. However, it is plausible that a set of shared taste and values, which are consistent to a degree, are prevalent among gamers and unique to this cultural grouping, and distinctive in its own right. This could be consistent across a plethora of locales, members and may persist through durations of time as defining features of a gaming subculture.

Identity

Hodkinson (2002: 30-31) notes the lack of focus on individual members of a subculture, in terms of their own subjective accounts, throughout the history of subcultural study. In other words, he takes issue with a lack of focus on "Identity" in subcultural study. The indicator of identity is for Hodkinson where the researcher focuses on the subjective perceptions of the subculturalists themselves that they are "involved in a distinct cultural grouping and

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share feelings of identity with one another". This will lead, for Hodkinson, to the identification of a clear awareness of *a sustained subjective sense of group identity*. Centrally what this does is help to define structural understanding from the perspectives of gamers themselves, who are internally involved in the "subculture" of gaming.

One finds that contemporary subcultures, like gaming, share both a sense of group identity among members and a distinctive difference (of individuality) comparatively among members. However, if one is to divulge the necessity of group identity within contemporary subcultures one finds its purpose is largely of playing the role of an advocate for differentiating "outsiders" from "insiders". This informs a structure around the subculture which can be accommodating of a divergent membership, and permeable in terms of the frequency of the changing membership.

In essence, the subculture is surrounded by a shifting structure where criteria such as gender and age are inconsistent as determining factors for being a gamer. In coming to terms with identity, within the holistic view of contemporary subculture one then has to account for the possibility of a flexible structure.

Commitment

"Commitment" (2002: 31) means that s*ubcultural activities can saturate, and dominate, members' entire lives,* invading their free time, determining their friendships, where they shop, what commodities they collect, where they go out, and internet usage. The levels of commitment vary from member to member, and an increasing display of open commitment to the subculture can further a member's standing. A passion for subcultural activities is of course central here. This defines insiders and outsiders. Fundamentally, this type of concentrated dedication can be indicative of distinguishing subcultures from more "fleeting" cultural groupings (2002: 31).

The levels of participation (and therefore commitment) vary from member to member and an increasing display of open commitment to the subculture can further a member's standing (2002: 31). In comparison, those on the periphery will not receive the same social standing within the subculture as those members who have displayed their commitment openly throughout their social activities (2002: 31).

Autonomy

Hodkinson (2002: 32-33) regards both commerce and the media as crucially important to "the construction and facilitation of subcultures": a sign of a substantial subculture is that *subculturalists are themselves involved in commerce* (running a shop selling subcultural goods, for example) *and media* (promoting or articulating the subculture, or a website community forum). Within this criterion, known as "Autonomy", the importance of different scales and types of media and commerce is essential. Inevitably, a subculture will be connected to the society and politico-economic system that it is situated in, but retaining a high level of subcultural autonomy.

Differentiation between the different types of commercial activities, arising from the subculture, needs to be critical as most of these ventures are underpinned by subcultural support (members running businesses for members) (2002: 32). The researcher must acknowledge the fine line between profit-making in businesses which are voluntary and grass-roots in origin, and those which are fully blown commercial profiteering rings. Hodkinson's (2002: 33) interest with this model is not in divisions of business as "micro, niche and mass"; however, his interest lies theoretically in distinguishing between internal (subcultural) and external (non-subcultural products and services) forms of media and commerce. The model necessitates the expression of the difference between small subcultural businesses and large corporate businesses which benefit from the subcultural revenue.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Hodkinson's subcultural model links into the concept of a subculture of consumption, where members are not "uniquely grounded" in a fixed set of socioeconomic circumstances (Thompson and Troester 2002: 553). There are different levels of participation within the gaming scene, and many gamers come from particularly different socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, what Hodkinson's model demonstrates is the permeability of the membership of contemporary subcultures, centred on media and commerce (entrenched within a cycle of consumerism). However, there is a somewhat discernable structure within contemporary subcultures that is shifting and not static like many "modernist" theorists (Hebdige etc.) conceived subcultures to be. Consequently, this again fits into the concept of a subculture of consumption, which, within its symbolic boundaries, is more permeable in comparison to a classic subculture as envisaged by Hebdige (Thompson and Troester 2002: 553). The membership is centred on consumption (as in gaming, largely around videogames) and thus subcultural capital in a subculture of consumption is constituted out of "group experiences, knowledge, and skills" attained through an investment of monetary value (Thompson and Troester 2002: 553).

As such, gamers' identities, backgrounds and lifestyles are not essential factors for entering into a subculture of consumption. It is rather about demonstrating commitment to the subculture through understanding the tastes and values shared by all members, which arguably has defined the videogames industry. It is also about examining the concept of a sense of group identity which defines insiders and outsiders, and builds a variety of audiences within the gaming industry. All of this is fuelled by a gamer's own knowledge and tastes (making up their subcultural capital) which becomes an indicator of commitment to others, and positions a member within the subculture.

Furthermore, an industry is developed surrounding the subculture and taps into the shared tastes and values of the gaming subculture as a measure of what conceivably can be a "good" game. The industry itself is generally made up of gamers developing games for gamers. This brings one back to the intriguing criterion of "autonomy" within Hodkinson's

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model, and that there is a fine line in the videogames industry of making profit, and pursuing a passion for making videogames, just as the border between the subculturalist and the capitalist corporation is not at all clear, since subculturalists are themselves designers of games. One also has the big publishers and large developers who dominate the market with AAA videogames (big budget videogames), and the small independent start-ups (referred to as indie developers) all feeding into this industry. Ultimately, a whole subculture has sprung up from the symbolic consumption of a mere consumer good (a videogame), built on the foundation of those who are passionate and committed to the pursuit of gaming.

3. Research Methodology

Introduction

The methodology used in my ethnographic research was qualitative and utilised the following methods: participant observation, purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, autoethnography, and thematic analysis. This chapter explains these techniques and how they were practically used in my research.

Qualitative Research and Ethnography

To define ethnography and qualitative research as a whole is a difficult task. The researcher first has to understand that any definition of the field has to work within complex historical parameters where what constitutes the discipline has shifted over time, sometimes dramatically, as in the "crisis of representation" of the 1980s where the questioning of the "objectivity" of ethnography led to far-reaching disciplinary transformations (Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 1-32). This leaves any ties to a distinct definition tenuous at best. The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research (2005) offers one of the most useful and flexible definitions:

> Qualitative study is a positioned activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 3).

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This decisive emphasis upon "the views of those involved, and the subjective and social constructs of their world" points to a rejection of any research practice that privileges the world-view of the researcher (Flick, Kardorff and Steinke 2004: 5). Instead the research process should favour a "humanist" attention to the lifeworld of the researched:

> Qualitative research claims to describe lifeworlds "from the inside out", from the point of view of the people who participate. By so doing it seeks to contribute to a better understanding of social realities and to draw attention to processes, meaning patterns and structural features. Those remain closed to non-participants, but are also, as a rule, not consciously known by actors caught up in their unquestioned daily routine. Qualitative research, with its precise and "thick" descriptions, does not simply depict reality, nor does it practise exoticism for its own sake. It rather makes use of the unusual or the deviant and unexpected as a source of insight and a mirror whose reflection makes the unknown perceptible in the known, and the known perceptible in the unknown, thereby opening up further possibilities for (self-) recognition (Flick, Kardorff and Steinke 2004: 3).

Thus, the beauty of qualitative research – caught up as it is in the naturalistic and "messy" everyday life of its research environment - is that it is typically more open and flexible than other research methods for which the controlled environment of the laboratory, strictly controlled questionnaires, and results derived from mathematical precision are mandatory. This openness of qualitative research has also influenced the choice of ethnographic methodology used throughout the thesis. John Brewer (2000: 30) argues that what he calls the "humanistic model of social research" challenged from the 1960s onwards the Positivist assumption that "the methods, concepts and procedural rules of the natural sciences can be applied to the study of social life," and that the world itself can be understood objectively through scientific method.

Instead, for what Brewer also calls the interpretive or hermeneutical or naturalistic approach, there are no strict rules to follow as qualitative research epitomises "a very openness to the world of experience, its internal design and the principles of its construction" (Flick, Kardoff and Steinke 2004: 5). As such:

> Naturalism is an orientation concerned with the study of social life in real, naturally occurring settings; the experiencing, observing, describing, understanding and analysing of the features of social life in concrete situations as they occur independently of scientific manipulation. The focus on natural situations leads to this orientation being described as 'naturalism', and it is signified by attention to what human beings feel, perceive, think and do in natural situations that are not experimentally contrived or controlled (the emphasis upon interpretation also explains why it is called the hermeneutical paradigm) (Brewer 2000: 33).

If the task of this thesis was to "provide an in-depth study of a culture that includes behaviour, interactions, language and artefacts...the aim is to understand another way of life from the native point of view by focusing on ordinary, everyday behaviour" (Bloor and Wood 2006: 69), then the techniques I used to achieve this aim, which are outlined below, are themselves also in part defined by their flexibility, because it is one thing ideally to define a methodology and often quite another to apply it practically in the real research context. From my experience, a methodology at times appears to be more of a broad guide than a strict set of rules that must be rigorously followed. When researching gaming, it became apparent to me that the methodologies needed to be simultaneously structured *and* flexible in order to fulfil the necessary requirements of data collection and analysis.

The rest of the chapter explains the different techniques I used to gather and analyse data for my thesis, and how these were actually used by me in practice.

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Purposive Sampling

Typically, there are different types of sampling with most well-known types of sampling being random (or probability) sampling (most associated with quantitative research) and the second being purposive (or purposeful) sampling (most associated with qualitative research). Purposive sampling (a type of non-random sampling) was used in this thesis and involves the researcher 'purposively' selecting individuals who make up the sample (Deacon et al. 1999: 41), on the basis of their ability to illuminate the culture being studied:

> Qualitative research uses non-probability samples for selecting the population for study. In a non-probability sample, units are deliberately selected to reflect particular features of or groups within the sampled population. The sample is not intended to be statistically representative: the chances of selection for each element are unknown but, instead, the characteristics of the population are used as the basis of selection. It is this feature that makes them well suited to small-scale, in-depth studies (Ritchie, Lewis and Elam 2003: 78).

The point of purposive sampling is that enables the individual researcher to acquire research subjects that are information-rich cases that can be studied in-depth:

> This means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study. Decisions need to be made about who or what should be sampled, what form the sampling will take, and how many people or sites need to be sampled (Creswell, 2007: 125).

Jane Ritchie, Jane Lewis and Gillian Elam (2003: 79) argue that there are two principal aims with purposive sampling: firstly to ensure that "all the key constituencies of relevance to the subject matter are covered", and secondly that within each "key criteria" there is diversity so that the effectiveness of each "characteristic" can be well examined. The

criterion of diversity often entails age, gender, social class and racial demographics, depending on the type of qualitative research you are conducting.

The participants in my research project were chosen purposively. The main core of participants were classified as individuals who are dedicated to gaming as a hardcore activity (hardcore gamers), or as a professional passion, in one form or another, such as working in the videogame industry (be it in the media or the development side of videogames), as well as individuals who play videogames casually (casual gamers). The reason for such a varied core sample, especially the inclusion of casual gamers, was to allow the research to identify the line that divides casual from hardcore gamers. What specificity can we identify amongst hardcore gamers which are not found amongst the more casual gamers?

The importance of course is in making the research sample as broad as possible as this will give the researcher a great range of information as well as "perspectives" upon the subject of inquiry, and leads to greater efficiency in data collection (Yin 2011: 88). This is why I had a mixture of both males and females in my research sample, and did so purposively, and met limitations and challenges regarding balancing issues in the sample. Effectively, this meant that there were an unequal number of males and female gamers in my sample; this was due in part to the lack of qualified female gamers that met the requirements of the predetermined criteria and research question. The unwillingness of female gamers to be interviewed was a stumbling block; balancing was a key issue that could not be avoided. I therefore focussed on acquiring information-rich female research participants instead of greater numbers. In contrast, interviewing male gamers was not a difficult task. However, I felt that moving towards gender issues in a Masters thesis would further complicate an already complex research effort. One has to remember that the research was initially centred in the Durban, KwaZulu-Natal area, but following further research and gaining an understanding of gaming, I realised its broader appeal. This meant that my sample began to shift in locale and included not only individuals from the Durban area, but also from Johannesburg and Cape Town, which gave greater depth to the research conducted.

I also used snowball or chain sampling which is an approach that can lead you to information rich "key informants". This approach differs from others greatly in that you ask well situated people in a cultural group or subgroup about "who else to talk with", and the assumption is that this will create a "snowball" that will generate an increasing number of "key informants" (Patton 1990: 111). I used this aspect of purposive sampling to find sources of gaming knowledge that were dependable and information rich.

Finally, I also employed opportunistic sampling. Opportunistic sampling is characterised by the type of fieldwork which involves, "on-the-spot decisions about sampling to take advantage of new opportunities during actual data collection". In essence, you can change your sampling strategy to suit opportunities which may arise "after fieldwork has begun" and you take advantage of the sample as it "unfolds" (Patton 1990: 114). This means that your core sample can naturally emerge as you conduct fieldwork. This aspect of this type of sampling was particularly useful in my own research as it gave me the freedom to make necessary decisions when it was needed and allowed me to gain access to information-rich research subjects, that otherwise may have not been possible. Interviewing gamers, people from the gaming press and also videogame developers allowed me to connect with a range of different individuals, and through actively pursuing research leads I became increasingly more entrenched within the gaming community. It was from this point that I began conducting semi-structured interviews with an array of research subjects.

The sample was chosen based on the criteria of identifying a hardcore gamer sample and a casual gamer sample, in order to fully delineate "who" made up the core of the gaming subculture in South Africa. I was interested in identifying gamers who were from the inner core of the contemporary gaming subculture in South Africa, and whom could offer an in-depth knowledge of gaming that could serve as a counterpoint, and comparative measure, with the casual gamer sample. The casual gamer sample was chosen from a group of people who played games on a casual basis and did not express the depth of gaming knowledge that those from the hardcore gamer sample did. To complement the hardcore and casual gamer samples, I also interviewed members of the videogame press, including media

personalities, and independent (indie) videogame developers to gain an insider working knowledge of the reality of the videogames industry.

In terms of numbers, two casual gamers were interviewed and three hardcore gamers. Two of the hardcore gamers doubled as part of the media, owing to their involvement in online gaming-centric websites. In relation to more traditional modes of media such as TV and print, I interviewed two prominent members of the gaming media within South Africa. The number of indie developers interviewed involved six developers in total. Within the research process, the overall number of women interviewed was four individuals, and the number of men totalled nine individuals. Interviews were conducted in Durban and Johannesburg, within the period of 2011 to 2012. Interviews lasted, on average, around fifteen to twenty minutes. The experience of interviewing was daunting at first but after conducting a couple of interviews the process was far less arduous than previous attempts. There were not any problems or problematic situations when interviewing, largely because I as the researcher was embedded deeply within the gaming subculture and had developed a rapport with the research participants beforehand. However, it must be stated that there were some initial problems with conveying and asking questions in some situations, where a research participant did not understand a question in its entirety. A result of this, was that questions were adjusted where necessary as dictated by the requirements of the interview and the research situation.

Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews are essential to any respectable ethnographic study that hopes to illuminate the meanings found in an individual's world-view, through their own personal response:

> It is a distinctive feature of social research that the 'objects' studied are in fact 'subjects', in the sense that they have consciousness and agency. Moreover, unlike physical objects or animals, they produce accounts of themselves and their worlds. Recognition of the significance of this has always been central to ethnographic thinking, though it has been interpreted in somewhat different ways over time and across different fields (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 97).

As a researcher, one notes that there is a discrepancy in interviewing between treating the subjects as both a vessel for gaining knowledge and information about the research question at hand, and as a human being with a very personal response about the subject the researcher is inquiring upon. In my experience from the research process, this discrepancy has played out as fine line between bolstering personal responses from a research subject about their own personal feelings about gaming and asking them more directed information seeking questions that pinpoint the most relevant information I as the researcher need for the purposes of data collection. This is why I found the semi-structured interview to be the most flexible of the interview practices as it encouraged freedom and adaptation throughout the interview process I conducted among all my research participants.

The semi-structured interview is where:

> The interviewer usually has a written list of questions to ask the informant but tries, to the extent possible, to maintain the casual quality found in unstructured interviews (Berger 2000: 112).

The semi-structured interview is simply characterised as an interview method that takes the best elements from both unstructured interviews and structured interviews. Although

the "written list of questions" exists, the importance is the topic "behind" the question, which can therefore be asked in a different way, depending on the context of the informal conversation. The researcher guides the interview and allows various aspects of the subject to arise naturally (Bertrand and Hughes 2005: 79). The greatest advantage of the semi-structured interview is that it can lead to the development of a written record that can be analysed in detail (Berger 2000: 113). In turn, the researcher can obtain very personal responses from participants that can be insightful for the purposes of research (Bertrand and Hughes 2005: 79). It is important to maintain what Yin (2011: 134) calls a "conversational mode" between the researcher and participants:

> This conversational mode, compared to structured interviews, presents the opportunity for two-way interactions, in which a participant even may query the researcher. In addition, qualitative interviews can take place between the researcher and a group of persons rather than a single person only.

This informality in the relationship between the researcher and research subject generates a dialogue between the researcher and subject, and yields greater possibilities for data with greater depth. The more important research questions in your interview will need to be more of the open-ended variety than close-ended, as to incite a more developed answer with greater depth, as it is against the researcher's best interests to limit the potential data output from the research subject being interviewed (Yin 2011: 135).

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The qualitative researcher needs to foreground a range of skills, as Robin Legard, Jill Keegan and Kit Ward (2003: 142) remind us:

> In-depth interviewing makes a number of demands on the mental and intellectual abilities of an interviewer. First, the ability of the researcher to listen is fundamental to the art of interviewing. The researcher must hear, digest and comprehend the participant's answers in order to decide how to probe further. Second, good in-depth interviewing requires a clear, logical mind. The researcher needs to be able to think quickly to distil the essential points of what the participant is saying, exercise judgement about what to pursue, and simultaneously formulate the relevant question. Third, a good memory is an important attribute. It is often necessary to make a mental note of a point made earlier on by the participant and return to it at a judicious moment in the interview to seek further clarification.

From my own research process, many of the interviews conducted ranged from: "spontaneous, informal conversations in the course of other activities to formally arranged meetings in bounded settings", depending on the personality of the person being interviewed, and what I noticed was that the line dividing interviewing from the other element of my methodological approach, participant observation, was difficult to distinguish (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 108).

Interviews involving hardcore and casual gamers were conducted mainly in Durban at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and online through voice chat programs such as *Skype*. Interviews with independent videogame developers and gaming media press took place in Johannesburg at the annual gaming and technology expo called *rAge*, at the Coca-Cola Dome. The format of interviews consisted of one-on-one interviews in most cases, particularly when interviewing the gaming media press sample, hardcore gamer sample, and casual gamer sample. The format of the interviews involving independent game developers were in two instances structured as a focus group, where I could gain a larger amount of information from experienced developers than on a one-on-one basis. Interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder, and transcribed following the completion of

interviews, which were typically between the lengths of fifteen to twenty minutes as previously mentioned.

Participant Observation

Interviewing and thereby gaining intimate knowledge of your research subjects naturally leads to an enhanced participation in the subculture - and hence the important technique of participant observation (Berger 2000:161). This means the researcher becomes involved – or immersed – in the group he or she is researching in order to gain an in-depth knowledge of it.

> Participant observation is immersion in a culture. Ideally, the ethnographer lives and works in the community for 6 months to a year or more, learning the language and seeing patterns of behaviour over time. Long-term residence helps the researcher internalize the basic beliefs, fears, hopes, and expectations of the people under study. The simple, ritualistic behaviours of going to the market or to the well for water teach how people use their time and space and how they determine what is precious, sacred, and profane. The process may seem unsystematic; in the beginning, it is somewhat uncontrolled and haphazard. However, even in the early stages of fieldwork, the ethnographer searches out experiences and events as they come to his or her attention (Fetterman 2010: 37).

Participant observation is conducted in "natural settings" which reflect the "reality of the life experiences" of participants, more succinctly than artificially "contrived" settings (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982: 43). This type of observation research was pertinent to the success of a data collection for me as the researcher because:

> In observation-based research, 'exchange' between the researcher and the research subjects is the medium that assists the transformation of ideas and thoughts into the words and activities recorded. Exchange also acts as a corrective to the assumptions inherent in the researcher (his or her predisposition to counter-transference) that might otherwise be projected onto the research subjects (Nightingale 2008: 105).

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Whyte (2001: 163) takes participant observation to be a "shorthand term" for a host of other interrelated methods which include interviewing, because what is learnt from observing and participating is supplemented with interviewing. Of course, observation is centrally about getting "a feel" for a particular culture, which comes from an active "seeing" of behaviour patterns, group interactions, material expressions of the culture, and so on. After all, the main research instrument in qualitative research is the researcher, whose (academic) experience of the subculture is central to the outcome of the research. In my own research, I had to frequent gaming events such as the annual gaming and technology expo called *rAge* in both 2011 and 2012, held in Johannesburg, and the more frequent local Durban gaming event, or meet-up, called *DBNGamers*. I also met frequently with gamers for both informal and formal interviews. This was pertinent to the research process as it afforded me the valuable opportunity of situating myself in the real life social world of gamers, and I gained perspective into how the gaming subculture, or community, sustains itself on both on a local and national level.

The result of an "immersion in a culture" and working over an extensive period with a cultural group, is that the researcher gains a greater diversity in and quality of the data collected. This was immeasurably helped by my also being a hardcore gamer who has been an active member of the gamer subculture for a long time. Besides attending gaming events, I am also a gaming journalist at *eGamer* (2009), a local gaming website, where I review games and write articles more generally on the gaming scene, and which gave me the tools necessary to understand gamers. Being already "inside" the researched subculture allows for a short-circuiting of the research process, as the researcher does not have to start from scratch to understand the nature of the subculture, instead he or she is able to draw upon a vast cultural capital, and, moreover, the "insider" researcher also has a passion for in this case gaming which helps to drive the research process.

Virginia Nightingale (2008: 19) labels individuals such as me "fan-academics":

> Fan-academics are often academics who decide to base their research on a phenomenon or community of which they have first-hand knowledge. They claim the privilege of researching and writing about their fannish passions and interests. Henry Jenkins, a self-confessed fan-academic, has identified this occupation as a fan specialisation, alongside other occupational specialisations in fandom such as fan editor, writer composer, artist, convention organiser, activist – the list goes on. The size, diversity and global reach of a contemporary fandom promotes such specialisation.

What one also needs to understand is that participant observation, like the semi-structured interview, is an "omnibus field strategy" (Patton 2002: 265). It combines elements such as "document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation, and introspection" and as such these practices are difficult to separate, particularly in the case of informal interviewing and participant observation. Therefore one can argue as Michael Patton (1990: 265-266) does:

> Thus, the participant observer employs multiple and overlapping data collection strategies: being fully engaged in experiencing the setting (participation) while at the same time observing and talking with other participants about whatever is happening.

Yet I as the researcher employed the usage of participant observation not only because of its flexibility, but also its focal ability to allow for the generation of information rich data.

Brewer (2000: 59) notes this quality of participant observation, in specific relation to the "close involvement" necessitated between researcher and research object in order for information rich data to be generated:

> The intent behind this close involvement and association is to generate data through watching and listening to what people naturally do and say, but also to add the dimension of personally experiencing and sharing the same everyday life as those under study. The researcher's own attitude changes, fears and anxieties, and social meanings when engaging in and living with the people in the field form part of the data. Data are thus not external stimuli unaffected by the intervention of participant observers, for their autobiographical experiences in the field are a central part of understanding it.

Barbara Tedlock (2005) adds to this debate arguing that data is generated not only from the research participants, but also from the researcher. Tedlock (2005: 467) refers to the process of data created by the self, the researcher, as "autoethnography": "during this activity, they reflect on and critically engage with their own participation within the ethnographic frame". This is an act of self-reflexivity, whereby the researcher acknowledges himself or herself within the research process as a point of data creation, and not merely an objective onlooker with no real implications, and effects, within the research process. As a gamer myself, I also found it invaluable to test remarks made by gamers against my own gaming experiences.

Throughout the research process, as a researcher I actively kept writing down "field notes" when possible. Field notes provide a space for researcher to write down in-depth observations, ranging from quotes, thoughts to general observations about the participants under study, allowing for a great depth of self-reflexivity within the research process (Gray 2003: 88). This was of great help as I was situated within the subculture actively participating and noting the intricacies of gamers' behaviour. Making field notes became vitally important and I kept two types of field notes, specifically when I frequented the gaming expo called *rAge* in both 2011 and 2012. The first set of field notes were typed out on site at the expo, with brief jotted notes in a journal as a starting point to develop a more coherent account of what was going.

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These notes were limited in length because of time constraints and my first outing to *rAge* was mainly focussed on conducting interviews with a host of industry professionals, journalists and independent videogame developers. My field notes, or account of the event, were published together with fellow staff members from the gaming website *eGamer* on their website in 2011. During 2012, I visited the expo once more and this time around managed write a short narrative which aided in developing a more thorough account of the gaming event and the activities that happened during the expo. Many of the interviews conducted during that part of the research phase happened within focus groups. Field notes (which can also include photographs and video material) are the record - along with interview transcripts – of the research process, and in turn become the raw material from which an analysis is forged.

Focus groups

David Morgan (2008: 352) defines focus groups thus:

> Focus groups are a form of qualitative interviewing that uses a researcher-led group discussion to generate data. Since their reintroduction to social science research in the mid-1980s, focus groups have become a popular method because, like individual interviews, they can be modified in a wide variety of ways to suit an equally wide range of purposes. They can thus be used for exploratory research, where the participants are relatively free to discuss the topic as they see fit, or they can be used in a more structured fashion, where the interviewer or moderator takes a more active role in controlling the issues to be discussed.

Focus groups are at their core "free-form discussions by a group of people, led by a moderator, designed to obtain information about some topic" (Berger 2000: 112).Arthur Berger (2000: 112) notes that focus groups are considered to be semi-structured interviews with a bigger sample size. They therefore face the same advantages and disadvantages as the semi-structured interview (Bertrand and Hughes 2005: 79).

Focus group interviews however differ from the semi-structured interview because the focus group helps to discern how people respond in a *group*, in order to circulate specific discourses (Bertrand and Hughes 2005: 79-81). Thus the data collected reflects the feelings and opinions of the respondents shaped by the experience of discussing a topic with other people. Ideally, in the case of a focus group the researcher needs six to ten participants. At the centre of focus groups, that core factor, is the "use of the participants" discussion as a form of data collection" (Morgan 2008: 352).

When conducting focus groups the researcher has to remember that:

> Focus groups are used both as a stand-alone method of generating data and in combination with other methods. Their successful use requires careful planning (including strategies for recruiting participants, logistics of recording data, and so on), thoughtfully prepared questions (with special attention paid to phrasing and sequencing), skillful moderation of the discussion, and thorough analysis of the data (Schwandt 2007: 119).

The advantage from my own experience of utilising focus groups is that it gives the researcher a greater diversity of data in a shorter period of time, then if he or she relied on the typical individual interview. Just as with the conversational nature of participant observation, focus groups give way to discussions around a topic and this was an essential part of the data I collected, especially with regard to gaming culture and the perceptions of both gamers and professionals in the industry. In the series of interviews I conducted with independent videogame developers, for example, it became apparent that most developers work from within studios which are group efforts, and this constant team-work facilitated the generation of subcultural meanings which not only produced a shared world-view, but also contributed to sustaining the subculture.

Since my study was focussed on understanding gaming as a contemporary subculture, the focus groups I mediated brought to life the communal aspect of gaming through the data generated. Interviewees within focus groups and from what I witnessed first-hand felt more comfortable within the atmosphere of a focus group than in the setting of an individual interview. Focus groups in some ways can help to combat the shyness of certain research

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subjects. Yet focus groups allowed me to gather a great amount of transcribed verbal data in the process of interviewing a large sample. This is when data analysis came into play, and I decided to use a thematic analysis as a means of assessing the data I had collected.

Focus groups formed part of my research strategy for independent game developers as I was dealing with much a much larger grouping of individuals to interview, and was faced with a short amount of time to conduct the research process in Johannesburg. Focus groups afforded less time constraints and were flexible given the circumstances of the research situation at the time. Focus groups involving the independent game developers occurred during late September to early October 2011, and consisted of two groups of indie developers with one group, of two student developers, and another more prominent studio, composed of three members. The first group were two students studying game design at the *Learn3D* animation and game design institute, whilst the other group was a well-known independent indie game studio called *QCF Design*. The focus groups were recorded, once again, with a digital voice recorder which was followed by a thorough period of transcription to effectively organise the recorded data.

Coding and Thematic Analysis

I chose thematic analysis as the means of analysis for my research thesis because it allowed for an easier method of simplifying data into categories and was less stringent than other data analysis methods. This is particularly helpful when dealing with a great amount of transcribed semi-structured interviews which are purely made up of verbal data from the gamers, gaming professionals and developers I interviewed during the course of the research phases.

Ayres (2008: 867) helpfully defines coding:

> Thematic coding is the strategy by which data are segmented and categorized for thematic analysis. Thematic coding is a strategy of data reduction...

Ayres (2008: 867) then defines thematic analysis as:

> Thematic analysis is a data reduction and analysis strategy by which qualitative data are segmented, categorized, summarized, and reconstructed in a way that captures the important concepts within the data set. Thematic analysis is primarily a descriptive strategy that facilitates the search for patterns of experience within a qualitative data set; the product of a thematic analysis is a description of those patterns and the overarching design that unites them.

In summary, the researcher first codes the gathered field data into a list of a limited range of themes central to the research project, and then systematically interprets them to provide the crucial analysis of the cultural group, in my case the gaming subculture. In my own research this data was collected mainly through the means of semi-structured one-on-one interviews, and in focus groups. As such, some of the themes were "anticipated in the data set" because these themes (derived mainly from Hodkinson's (2002) four characteristics of subcultures) were exclusively used to construct the questions used for the semi-structured interview, providing "openness", flexibility and structure to the research model

used throughout data collection. Ayres (2008: 867) agrees that codes can come from a "beginning conceptual model" which can be informed by a literature review, for example, or in some instances professional research experience (or in my case, my research into the theories of subcultures). In practical terms the following happens:

> Coding facilitates the development of themes, and the development of themes facilitates coding. In coding, portions of data are separated from their original context and labelled in some way so that all data bearing the same label can be retrieved and inspected together (Ayres 2008: 867).

Coding is also defined as "indexing":

> Indexing (or coding) is the activity where a researcher applies meaning to raw data by assigning key words or phrases. These key words then act as signposts to themes within the data. Indexing is an activity by which data is broken down, conceptualized and then re-formulated (Bloor and Wood, 2006: 101).

I coded my gathered data into themes, and I was then helpfully guided by the six phases of a thematic analysis as described by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006: 87). These were so important to my project – in that they enabled my data analysis process to be systematic, organized and rigorous - that I describe each phase below.

1. In the first phase the researcher becomes familiarised with the collected data. Activities included in this phase that the researcher follows are: "transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 87). This phase is about "immersion" and involves repeated reading of data, in an active way, and finding the meanings and patterns that will develop into themes. The nature of this phase also means that if you are working with verbal data you need to transcribe it into a written form.

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Transcription of verbal data is an important key to quality research because:

> If you are working with verbal data, such as interviews, television programmes or political speeches, the data will need to be transcribed into written form in order to conduct a thematic analysis. The process of transcription, while it may seem time consuming, frustrating, and at times boring, can be an excellent way to start familiarizing yourself with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 87).

2. In the second phase, the researcher starts generating "initial codes" which implies "coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion" across the entirety of data collected, and assigning particular sets of data into relevant codes. This is where the emerging themes become more apparent as the codes evolve into themes, and fully-fledged theoretical concepts which can be analysed thoroughly. In this phase, the researcher is "organising your data into meaningful groups" that will develop into more useable "themes" as stated above (Braun and Clarke 2006: 88).

3. In the third phase, the researcher is "searching for themes" which means creating themes from the codes which you have used, and assigning all the relevant codified data into potential themes: "you are starting to analyze your codes and consider how different codes may combine to form an overarching theme". You are in the process developing a host of "candidate" themes, or main themes, and sub-themes (Braun and Clarke 2006: 89).

4. In the fourth phase, you begin to review your themes. There are two sub-phases, or levels, within this primary phase of the thematic analysis. In the first sub-phase, or level, you check if your themes are workably effective in relation to the coded extracts, and that they "appear to form a coherent pattern" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 91). In the second level, or sub-phase, you proceed with the same procedure and examine the entire data set, per individual themes, and examine where you can generate a "thematic map" which accurately reflects the "meanings evident in the data set as a whole". This representation of your data set as whole needs to be in line with your "theoretical and analytic approach" and should match up with the intent of your primary research question.

5. In the fifth phase, you define and start to name themes. This phase is essentially an "ongoing analysis" which you specify what each theme is. You are "determining what aspect of the data each theme captures" and the overall narrative of the analysis. The result is a set of "clear definitions", and therefore "names" for each theme (Braun and Clarke 2006: 92).

6. In the final and sixth phase, the researcher has to produce a report which is where the "final opportunity for analysis" occurs. The point of the report is "to tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 93).This is achieved through choosing a selection of "vivid, compelling extract examples" for the final analysis, and connecting them to the analysis, research question and literature. This is a final measure which concludes discussion in the data analysis and grants narrative closure to the thematic analysis as a whole.

Validity, Reliability and Rigour of Methods

This brings us to the next necessary step in assessing any research method which is the validity, reliability and rigour of the methods used. It must be pointed out that this is a highly contested field in ethnography, particularly since the "crisis of representation" of the 1980s where the claims of research "objectivity" were aggressively challenged. I am quite prepared to accept, in line with these critiques, that far from being an objective and disinterested observer of the gaming subculture, I am in fact a "situated" and gendered researcher located within a specific culture, history and intellectual/academic context; that my research project, far from being the work of a single academic (me), is the product of a dialogical "encounter" between me and the gaming subculture; and that I am also capable of "self-reflexivity" to be aware of these often obscured realities, as shown in the word of Paula Saukko (2003). If anything, in recent years an unorthodox ethnography has moved closer to the world of fictional writing, as shown in the work of Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2005), which, since "fiction" is traditionally the very opposite of "fact"

and "truth", is a quite remarkable turn-around for a discipline once strictly defined by its "scientificity". What is of central importance in these interventions, of course, is that the researcher becomes aware of his or her active *constructing* of a researched world: not some respectful "reflecting", but the *writing* of a complex research experience.

Reliability refers to:

> The extent to which studies can be replicated. It requires that a researcher using the same methods can obtain the same results as those of a prior study (LeCompte and Goetz 1982: 35).

In order for this study to be as rigorous as possible the methodology as described above was employed as carefully and rigorously as possible. An obvious limitation of ethnographic research, and in particular my study, is that such research occurs in "natural settings", and it is therefore the role of the researcher to record the processes of social and cultural change which obviously limit the possibilities of a replication of results. A research project is not unlike a static snap-shot of a river that is actually in constant motion and fluctuation. To combat this limitation, the study utilises a variety of different methods, in an attempt to "triangulate" the methodological design, and "such strategies enhance the "replicability" of the results (LeCompte and Goetz 1982: 35). The triangulating of the research design consists of: purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation and thematic analysis.

Validity:

> necessitates demonstration that the propositions generated, refined, or tested match the causal conditions which obtain in human life (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982: 43).

Validity – the accuracy or truthfulness of the ethnographic research process - is derived from the "data collection and analysis techniques" (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982: 43-46). This largely involves the common practice of living among participants and collecting data for long durations of time (participant observation), where informant interviewing can

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occur, leading ultimately to ethnographic analysis. One of the major limitations of participant observation, for instance, and which relates to validity, is that a "symbiotic" relationship can develop between the researcher and the participants (the researcher could be "going native"), which could affect the richness of the data obtained, and thus jeopardise the research process. It is therefore a necessary precaution that the researcher distance himself from the participants by disengaging from "informant relationships" gradually over time, or at the very least reflexively be constantly aware that one is both a "participant" and a researcher.

In this thesis, Paula Saukko's notion of "dialogic validity" was employed to great effect. This evaluates the validity of research in terms of "how truthfully it captures the lived worlds of the people being studied". For Saukko (2003: 19) "dialogic validity" is:

> Reminiscent of the old ethnographic goal of capturing the 'native's point of view'. Where it departs from the old ethnographic project is that it does not claim to have access to some privileged 'objective' position, from which to describe the lives of others. Dialogism does not view research in terms of describing other worlds from the outside, but in terms of an encounter or interaction between different worlds. The main criteria of validity of this approach then is how well the researcher fulfils the ethical imperative to be true to, and to respect, other people's lived worlds and realities.

This is indeed an academic *and* ethical imperative that strongly guided my field-work and subsequent analysis. What this process of validity does for one's research is provide a sense of rigour and logical flow to how methods are followed. It means that the presentation of data and the analysis of results are achieved in an open way that does not exclude the multiplicity of perspectives you may come across during research. This is why I also employed a mixed methods approach throughout my own research so that I could triangulate my research design and could approach my research questions from a multitude of different methods, which all aided in leading to varied results. My research and the research subjects I chose were, as a result of this approach, information-rich subjects and data.

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4. Thematic Analysis

Introduction

The focus of my research is an empirical investigation of hardcore gamers. My hypothesis which was to be tested ethnographically was that the gaming subculture constitutes a "substantial" subculture that is neither a straight-forwardly "modernist" subculture as defined by CCCS and, in particular, Hebdige (1979), and not simply a "postmodernist" subculture (Bennett 1999; Muggleton 2000; 2003), despite being located within the contemporary postmodern period. My hypothesis is that the gaming subculture does not share the rebellious agenda, working-class specificity, rigid structuration, or radical "outsider" status (hence their being "outside" of capitalism and the media) of Hebdige's punks. It is, however, relatively structured and has generated a range of meanings, attitudes, behaviours and practices that mark it off from the "mainstream" culture. But it is also not an entirely "fluid" formation of ephemeral attachments, a mere reflex (as in Jameson's (1984) portrait of the postmodern) of the depthless fashion impulse. The gaming subculture, while having an internal complexity (many different sub-groups coalesce around many different games or genres of games) and porous borders (there is not the strict division between the subculture and "mainstream" society that one finds with the "modernist" conceptualisation) – both postmodern characteristics – nevertheless appeared to be an authentic and substantial community. Unlike the anti-capitalist thrust of Hebdige's punks, the gaming subculture, positioned in a period where, as Jameson (1984) argued, the economic and the cultural (as a site of resistance) are no longer independent of each other, can perhaps be more fully understood as a "subculture of consumption", that is a relatively coherent social grouping constructed around a passion for videogames (Schouten and McAlexander 1995: 43).

Hodkinson's (2002) four central characteristics of contemporary subcultures, that contains both "modernist" and "postmodernist" elements (discussed in my theoretical framework), seemed to me to allow the most illuminating study of the gaming subculture, as it continued to treat subcultures as "substantial" rather than ephemeral, while recognising their diversity and relative fluidity. Moreover, the working-class-based political resistance of Hebdige's punks was ditched; while subcultures were now immersed in the capitalist system, they nevertheless managed to construct and maintain, Hodkinson argued, a certain "autonomy" within that space.

My interviews and subsequent coding and thematising of the collected data were therefore based firmly around Hodkinson's four subcultural characteristics: consistent distinctiveness; commitment; identity; and autonomy. Hodkinson's schema became as it were four spotlights allowing me to focus on the characteristics of the gaming subculture with a grateful clarity.

It needs to be pointed out that these four characteristics proved to be less distinctive from each other once they were applied in my ethnographic research. This is of course typical of theoretical models generally – that they trade in abstract generalities which tend to be modified when confronted by empirical realities. In my case, the criterion of "consistent distinctiveness" – what set of values separated gamers from the rest of the population – on occasion bled into the criterion of "commitment" – how subcultural activities dominate the lives of subculturalists – precisely because what made serious gamers different from "casual" gamers in part was their indefatigable commitment to gaming. Similarly, the criterion of "identity" echoed through the two above criteria. In the following analysis, the reader will see that these three criteria cannot always be kept rigorously apart, and it is their interaction in places that perhaps provides solid evidence of gaming as a subculture.

Data resulting from the usage of Hodkinson's model proved to be interesting and often unexpected. For example, a perspective on the inner-workings of the gaming subculture's structure was gained, and where I initially assumed to find overwhelming evidence that the subculture was structurally fluid, it was surprising to find a more definite and hierarchical

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structure, which supported Hodkinson's subcultural analysis. This was interesting because despite the claims of fluidity by postsubcultural theorists such as Muggleton (2000), the gaming subculture proved to have a "structure" propelled by a sustained shared sense of group identity (Hodkinson 2002: 31). This structure was informed by a connection of gamers to other gamers, achieved through a "set of shared tastes and values" (Hodkinson 2002: 30). This was found to be quite consistent among hardcore gamers, be it if they were hardcore female or male gamers. This is not to say that structural rigidity was entirely evident; at the same time the border between gamers and "mainstream" society was much more fluid than, say, between Hebdige's punks and the broader society, where a militant opposition was identified. A gamer is part of a subculture that is caught up in capitalist social relations, and that is built around a passion for commodities, which in itself softens that border between subculture and mainstream; at the same time the gaming subculturalist (the serious gamer) may occupy a range of subject-positions outside of his or her gaming identity that are located within the mainstream – student, church-goer, etc. And, finally, the line between "hardcore" and "casual" gamer is not at all clear-cut, and is subject to constant re-definition. Both groups, after all, play games and are enthusiastic about them. It is in part the role of those in possession of high subcultural capital, as defined by Thornton (1995), to draw those boundaries in their favour. This is not the case for Hebdige's punks, whose appearance and behaviour placed them wholly outside of the "system", and where the idea of a "casual" punk would have been unthinkable (until, that is, the subculture was emasculated by capitalism).

Introduction To Participants

Caveshen

Caveshen is a twenty three year old male university student and gamer, who works part time for a gaming website called *eGamer*. He describes his position by saying:

> I report on news in the industry. I have spoken to people who record news on the industry, as well as people who are involved in the distribution in the industry locally. I follow current news, and I report on current news. And I play games, a lot of games.

He actively positions himself as both a passionate and dedicated gamer, with a media interest that is not inherently mainstream in any way. His passion for gaming and his understanding of the cultural underpinnings of gaming culture in both Durban and South Africa made him an excellent resource for information about the "scene".

Graham

Graham is a twenty two year old male university student and plays games on a casual basis. He describes himself as being very casual as a gamer and focuses more on work and other commitments in his life. For him, gaming is a part time "hobby" which he pursues out of an interest in the entertainment side of videogames. Comparatively, he is not as dedicated to gaming as Caveshen is.

Trisha

Trisha is a twenty three year old female university student who casually plays by herself and doesn't participate in community activities like the other participants in any form. Typically she plays games on a casual basis and prefers games in the platformer and action genres, as well as fighting games like *Tekken* (1994) game series. She also plays casual games like *Angry Birds* (2009). She never truly has enough time to dedicate to gaming like the other participants, and plays during the holidays mostly.

Lisa

Lisa is a thirty two year old female gaming journalist who co-owns the gaming website called *EL33TONLINE* (2006). She is deeply involved in the gaming community and sponsors local events in the Durban area, such as *DBNGamers*, a local meet-up, and event, for Durban gamers. She terms herself as a midcore gamer in terms of her gaming demographic and plays both casual and hardcore videogames. Relative to her gaming playing habits she says, "I think that a lot of people have the perception that if a girl is a gamer they must be casual gamers". In referring to her own gaming history, she had this to say:

> I started gaming in early high school, 12 or 13. I started playing *Duke Nukem* and stuff like that, and *Doom*, and *Quake*. A lot of my guy friends were into gaming and I was the only girl gamer. So I was quite renowned back there. So we used to play in PC LANs every weekend.

Nadine

Nadine is a twenty three year old female gamer who has been playing games since the age of thirteen years old. She has been gaming online since last year (2011) on the *PlayStation Network* (*PSN*), and has been participating in online gaming websites and forums for roughly three years. Nadine is a dedicated gamer and owns both a *PlayStation 3* and *Xbox 360*. She would be clearly defined as a hardcore gamer due to her usage of a variety of platforms and her dedication.

QCF Design

QCF Design is comprised of Danny (aged 32), Rodain (aged 26) and Marc (aged 31). They have developed videogames and games-related projects for the likes of *Nokia*, *Colgate*, and *Tropica*, and have also done consultations for the World Bank. They have previously developed an independent (indie) game called *SpaceHack*, and have now met critical and public success with their current indie game called *Desktop Dungeons*. All members of this studio recognise themselves as "gamers" developing videogames for other gamers to enjoy. They provided a great depth of insight into the world of videogame development and business practice.

Learn3D

Paul and Marco, both aged twenty three, were two student indie game developers, from *Learn3D*, an animation and game design training college situated in Johannesburg. Paul and Marco pursued a 3D animation course in the first year of study, and then during the second year studied game design which they have been pursuing ever since. For the *rAge* Expo 2011, Marco developed a game called *rAge Invaders* which was a spaceship shooter where you proceed from one side of the map to the other shooting enemies. Paul developed

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a game titled *BSOD* (Barrel Scrolling Overdose) where you climb up a ladder avoiding barrels, and collect items to obtain a high score. Both developers represent the young and burgeoning industry that is the independent games development movement.

Sven

Sven, aged twenty four, is an indie developer who started working for a game development studio called *Luma Arcade* between 2007 and 2008. He has worked on a number of games for *iPhone*, *iPad* and *iOS* platforms. He has worked on a 2D sidescrolling platformer and 3D marble games, and on a physics-based game similar to *Angry Birds*. After finishing high school and pursuing a degree at a local university, he decided to pursue a game design career, and wanted to start his own company. Just before setting out to do so, he was contacted by *Luma Arcade* and worked for them for a period of time. In 2011, he became an independent (indie) developer and chose that as a career path.

Michael James

Michael James is the editor of a prominent South African gaming magazine called *NAG* (1998) (New Age Gaming). The magazine went into publication during 1998. *NAG* was the first gaming magazine to reach mass popularity in South Africa, and was born out of a need for such a publication and a gap in the market, according to Michael James. Michael estimates that 33000 copies of the magazine circulate during the monthly release schedule, and feels that their readership is always expanding.

Pippa Tshabalala

Pippa Tshabalala is the former host of the highly popular gaming-centric TV show called *The Verge* (2008). Pippa taught 3D animation to Honours and Masters level students at Wits University for three years, until she was offered a TV presentation job by the production company *Don't Look Down Productions*, starting with the TV show *PlayR* (2008). Pippa has a degree in Fine Arts and studied general animation at *Learn3D*. She followed this with a Masters degree in Fine Arts majoring in Digital Animation.

Discussion of Data

a. Consistent Distinctiveness

The theme of "Consistent distinctiveness" is the necessity for an "authentic" subculture to have *a set of shared tastes and values* which are distinctive from those of other groups. These shared values must also be reasonably consistent across all members of the subculture from various locations, to the past and present forms of the community (Hodkinson 2002: 30). However, the reality of any research study means that there are limitations, and with this theme time progression differences are quite difficult to measure, given the limited time span of the research. Whether gamers were very similar ten years ago is beyond this research to gauge. Nevertheless, a range of topics and questions were developed for the interviews with gamers to illuminate the "consistent distinctiveness", such as the following questions:

> Do you think gamers have a shared set of values that distinguish them from other groups? If so, what do you think the values are? What values make gamers different?

An early point to confront was that in recent years interest in gaming has grown dramatically, attracting mass interest, shown in the fact that it has become a multi-billion dollar global industry, thus threatening to dilute the very notion of a gaming subculture with its shared and distinct values. When asked about the comparative consistency of the South African gaming community over the last few years, Caveshen argued that it has changed as a result of technological evolution. In essence, the widespread use of newer forms of technology has encouraged a "mainstream' acceptance of gaming as a social norm and everyday thing. Caveshen elaborated upon this by saying that "the gaming community locally is much larger; as technology improves more people can get access" and as a result it is "more mainstream" than in previous years. The social stigma, he argued, has lifted considerably as the appeal of gaming broadens and "it's less of a faux pas" than before.

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Lisa said that since she's been involved in her website *EL33TONLINE* she has noticed the rise of the videogame industry on the local level.

She relayed to me her own experiences:

> When I first started we were the first blog in South Africa. People kind of wondered what this videogame thing was. And when you say you have a gaming website they initially assume it's like a gambling website, which is weird for me. So you have to be very careful and say videogaming. Then also people like family and friends don't understand what gaming is about. They consider it to be linked to children and they think gaming is for kids.

However, Lisa argued that this misconception was cleared for many people when they actually played a videogame and interacted with a console, and videogame, on some level. Graham agreed with Caveshen, and said: "It has become more mainstream thanks to consoles. Five years what could have really changed? It's become more mainstream, that's it". He elaborated further, and like Caveshen, said that this is largely due to changes to the technological landscape which has aided the proliferation of videogames as a prime media and entertainment form. Graham argued that:

> A lot of communication and social activity has gone online and people are sort of neglecting real life conversations to talk to people on *Mxit* and *Facebook*. If you look at it gaming it is becoming another (online) social activity to interact with other people.

For Graham, the attraction of the new technology (or "new media"), in particular videogames, is "being able to relax and have fun" and have a chance to "escape from reality". Social media and videogames alike have the ability to transfer social experiences into a virtual state which the rise of this new technology accommodates. This is happening because of the increasing affordability of the new technology.

However, even in the midst of this burgeoning mainstream attraction to videogames, Caveshen maintained that there was still a "close knit community" at the centre of serious gaming in South Africa, and at the local level in Durban.

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Nadine argued that with regards to the core community of gamers:

> I would say people are more critical of games now. Games have to brilliant now to be enjoyed. They can't enjoy a simple game, like kids' games. In the past, people would play them and still enjoy them. Now it's just critical.

This discriminating sophistication amongst serious gamers was similarly observed by Lisa: "The casual gamer is definitely not the type of gamer who will sit down and play an FPS (first-person shooter)", a game requiring great skill and dedication.

From Caveshen's experience in the Durban community, he conveyed that the subcultural side of the gaming community - the "close knit community" - encompasses an increasing number of participants and has developed into something more "social". He further stated that in comparison to the past there are now more events happening on a monthly basis where people come together and "talk about games', while of course many interact subculturally online. This is therefore an interesting dynamic between a truly subcultural grouping within the local gaming community and the broader spectrum of individuals playing games, especially given that, as we have seen, playing games has become massively more popular and "mainstream" in recent years.

At this point, it is pertinent to ask what specifically attracts people to videogames, given the enormous passion for gaming that is obviously apparent among hardcore gamers, who routinely spend many hours daily playing games, because it is perhaps here that we can discover a set of "shared values" binding the subculture together. We also need to then be able to distinguish between "casual" and "hardcore" gamers, despite both enjoying the gaming experience. The attraction, Caveshen argued, for people to play videogames lies in the "cool factor" (nowadays, if something is "cool" it will also be "awesome") and popular trends in which gaming has been engaged.

Lisa elaborated upon her attraction to videogames saying:

> For me, it's just about having fun. I like to be able to escape into a game like *Uncharted 3*, which is completely awesome, and do things that you wouldn't be able to do yourself. I'm not so much a simulation type of game. So I don't like *The Sims*, or games like that. I like more racing games and things like that, and action games. I don't like shooting games which are like *Call of Duty*, because I've never liked a shooting game where you kill a human. I'll play *Gears of War*, *Resistance* because I'm shooting something that's invading earth and is like an alien. For me, there's a distinction there. I don't know what it is but I can't play a game where I'm shooting humans.

In contrast to the reasons for Lisa's attraction to videogames, Caveshen interestingly pointed out that the genre of games that have recently risen in popularity include modern military shooters, like *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), and the game series it spawned. Sports games have dropped in popularity, and strategy games like *DotA* (2003) (Defense of the Ancients, a multi-player online game) and RPGs (Roleplaying Games) have also found widespread appeal. Shooters, he maintained, are where the heart of the gaming industry headspace is at the moment. Graham agreed with this and stipulated that the game that's "risen in popularity" is mainly *Call of Duty*. Graham also felt that *DotA* is quite popular, but he as a gamer preferred first-person shooter games.

Nadine said that, in connection with the "attraction" of videogames, it was the *immersion* and the *interactive story* that held her attention:

> Well, why I like games in particular. I love reading and games because it takes you into another world and takes you away from reality. What's different about a game and a book for instance, you have that visual concept. Games are beautiful and it's nice to look at it and interact with. You can change the story. That's why I enjoy games. You can interact with everything.

As a researcher, I found it (initially at least) difficult to try and separate gamers who are into gaming due to its "mass appeal" standard as a form of entertainment, from those who

participate within the gaming community for subcultural values that are discernible. My research suggests that it is precisely these required deeper levels of *immersion* (journeying into a virtual and fictional world) and *interactivity* (actively participating in the making of the game text and its meanings) in the gaming experience by the most dedicated gamers - which is both quantitatively (more time spent) and qualitatively (the intensity of the experience sought) different from the standard experience of the "casual" gamer - that is a key factor dividing the "hardcore" from the "casual" gamer. This identifies the ludic specificity of gaming, around which the subculture is built.

In recent gaming theory, ludology has risen to prominence as a key way of understanding the attraction of gaming. Ludology argues that since videogames are not conventional texts, they should be viewed as an activity "akin to play or sport" (Dovey and Kennedy 2006: 22). The appropriation of ludology (play theory) is an attempt by academics to try and reassess videogames by addressing their prominent feature: "interactivity". Interactivity in videogames configures the interface of the "virtual" experience of the videogame into a "real" and social experience. Games can thus be understood not as "static media texts" but as *activities* (Dovey and Kennedy 2006: 22). To play a videogame is to participate in ludic *activities* which draw people into *emotional* connections with the medium (of videogames), which in turn can be seen, in the language of Sherry Turkle (2005: 267), as "evocative objects".

For the seriously dedicated gamer, the play activity of gaming is all-consuming, not unlike fans of playing tennis whose emotional commitment to the sport dominates their leisure time (playing, travelling to tournaments, attending professional contests, socialising with other tennis players at the local club, routinely reading magazines and online sites focused on tennis, taking holidays at tennis resorts, etc.), to the point when it becomes central to the articulation of identity: I am a person who loves tennis. All of this lifestyle then springs from the central affective pleasure gained from the ludic activity (of tennis, or gaming) itself.

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For the "hardcore" gamer, then, a wide range of activities grows around the core of the gaming experience (including online where the individual gamer interacts with many other gamers, including as being part of a "squad" competing against other "squads"), which position the gamer in a subcultural web of affiliations. These affiliations include regularly attending LANs (Local Network Parties), such as the monthly gathering in Durban called *FRAG*, or the annual and enormous *rAge* gaming expo in Johannesburg; routinely reading the South African *NAG* magazine dedicated to gaming, or a host of local gaming websites such as *eGamer* (many gamers also write for these sites – see the "autonomy" section below), and from these gathering enormous intellectual capital regarding gaming, including the appearance of new games (or new versions of games) or consoles, and endless information about computer hardware suitable for gaming. Further affiliations are chatting in online chat-rooms, and discussing games on gaming forums; frequenting gaming and computer shops (and illegal websites from where games can be downloaded for free); and socialising almost exclusively with other gamers. As we shall see in the "autonomy" section below, this enthusiasm can even extend to subcultural careers, such as game designing, or gaming journalism. The "shared set of values", then, around which the subculture blossoms, is precisely the shared, time-dominating, passion for the ludic – immersive, interactive – experience of gaming, which makes the gamer *distinct* from the surrounding society. It is the overwhelming dedication – in time and effort - to that experience which defines the "hardcore" gamer. All the dedicated gamers I spoke to share this view of gaming as a central feature of their lives.

My research has led me to conclude that there is indeed a distinction between the "hardcore" and "casual" gamer. Of course, anyone can be a "gamer"; gaming is postmodern in its allowance of membership that way. Yet there is a difference between calling yourself a "gamer" because you play games, and being called a "gamer" as a sign of significant subcultural membership. Caveshen shared this view and said that while "everybody counts a gamer" those in the hardcore gaming side of the subculture, at the centre of its structure, would not consider people who casually play videogames to be "gamers". It comes down to a sense of entitlement connected to the label of "gamer".

For Graham, as a person who casually play games, being a gamer doesn't differ that much from being a "normal person":

> Okay, I wouldn't say that it's different to that of the normal person. It's just taking their reality into a virtual sphere. They're bringing their values from real life. If you're a dick in real life, you'll be a dick in a game. But sometimes just because your dick in real life doesn't mean you're online.

In the subcultural sense, the hardcore gamers define the shared set of values that constitutes a person as a gamer. There are hierarchal structures in all subcultures, and if gaming is perceived as such it is no different in that regard. Because as Caveshen said, "I think they'd consider themselves above the casual gamers. Purely because, usually, core gamers have played a lot more and are a lot more willing to play games. I think the difference is passion". Passion in itself is, as we have seen, another shared value that establishes oneself as gamer, and can be validated through specific knowledge obtained through playing games, and constantly participating in gaming sessions with fellow gamers. Nadine said that hardcore gamers understand each other because of the same or similar values they share. They understand the deeper meaning of a game. They immerse themselves totally into the action of play which "connects them in some way" to one another. These dedicated gamers are experiencing and revel in the emotional connection the game provides. The hardcore gamers call themselves "gamers" because they, as Caveshen says, "have a passion for games, and it's not just something you do for fun". It is this value of dedication and demonstrating one's passion for videogames that is central to being recognised as a "gamer" by other gamers. Lisa acknowledged this:

> I think gamers are just so friendly that they just want to chat. You know they're just on *Xbox Live* and they just want to chat. They want to say hi. They are very community driven. Like I think that we don't have another industry like that. Because even if you go overseas, like I met this guy from Brazil for like two minutes and I'm already his friend because we like have an understanding.

Lisa argued that it is a deeply *affective* and dedicated experience for the seasoned gamer when playing games that is vastly different from the person who may casually play a game. There is a participatory quality (as an interactive media) that videogames tend towards, and the most dedicated gamers enter into this "contract" with a game. In relation to there being a shared set of values in gaming, Lisa explained that there are definitely shared values which make gaming distinctive:

> Definitely, I think that if you're not a gamer you're not going to watch developer diaries (a record of a game developer in the process of developing a game) and you're not following a game from when its announced to when it's released. You develop a connection with a game. I was at *Gamescom* when they announced *Resistance 3*. Then I played it at *Gamescom* and it was released, and I found a big connection to that game. Like as if I was a part of it. That's probably why gamers are so critical when they don't like a game. They feel like they can criticise because they've been a part of it.

The question of what separates a gamer from other groupings cannot be answered by reference to Hebdige's "spectacular style" (1979) – that disorienting physical appearance of goths or punks that visibly and obviously marks them as different from the mainstream (although below gamer dress is examined). Within the gaming community however, there are definite values and meanings which both my own observations and those of my respondents were able to identify. Caveshen said:

> I think if there's a level of confidence. If you mentioned a game you get a response. You could pick up that they're a gamer. A certain 'what are you talking about' kind of look. If you mention a game you get this sort of knowing sense from them.

This is of course true for all communities: one is recognized by others as being "one of us' on the basis of shared beliefs, behaviours and practices, and the gaming subculture is no exception to this. A gamer recognizes another gamer. Graham pointed out that there is a stereotype of the gamer and that in the past you would have received a specific type of answer in determining who "are" gamers, what is the language they use, and how they dress. However, anyone researching gaming needs to be aware that for "hardcore" gamers

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their dedication to gaming is a *serious life commitment that defines who they are* to a great extent.

When asked about other indicators of a gamer, such as clothing? Caveshen responded:

> Yes, to some extent I have come across people who are wearing gaming t-shirts. I'll walk up to them and ask if they play games. If they know this and that, and sometimes they won't know the character on the t-shirt, and they just bought it somewhere. And that's a shock because you wouldn't see that usually. For the most part, like 90% of the time, ya, if someone's wearing a gaming t-shirt then, ya. First of all they're brave to wear it in public and for playing games it's an easy indicator. Just now and again you get the one or two who don't really play games.

Of course, if someone is wearing a gaming related t-shirt it may be a visual indicator of the person's status as a gamer, but my own research leads me to conclude that it is not a shared value that all gamers wear gaming t-shirts and gaming related paraphernalia in order to express their distinction as a gamer. Trisha believed that in some cases appearance can be an indicator, and that you can tell from their "clothes and manner" that they are gamers. However, she felt that actually talking to someone and hearing them talk about games is a more significant indicator than the appearance of a "gamer". Caveshen related such a notion to an experience of his own:

> I had a friend in first year who three years later I found out is a huge *DotA* player, and I've played with him in games online not realising this. And we just sort of found out one day when I walked into a LAN and he was playing it. You don't really know someone apart from others if they specifically says they're a gamer. You can't tell.

Graham also expressed feelings from similar experiences and stated that there are indeed some differences between hardcore gamers and others:

> I think in mannerisms and the way you speak. Because in a subculture you adopt a certain language, or lingo. But if you look at the tournaments you see some of the guys are either the popular guys, or they dress differently to seem far from the stereotype. I mean if you look at Fatality or whatever his name is. He dresses like a normal guy. If you walked up to him in a normal street situation you wouldn't expect it.

Lisa also affirmed that you can only truly recognise someone as a "gamer" when you start speaking to them:

> Ya, so if you start talking to someone and all you can see is a blank stare then you know immediately they're not a gamer. Like if you start talking about something gamer related, they become bored. Like if not, they'll immediately switch and get more excited because they're talking about games.

However, one can take this *recognition* of who is and who is not a serious gamer further. For Thornton (1995), what defines the interior of a subculture is a hierarchy built around the possession of esoteric subcultural knowledge, what she calls "subcultural capital". Those with high subcultural capital have high status, and those with low subcultural capital have low status. There is therefore a constant policing of this hierarchy, as members (competitively) strive for higher status within the subculture. My own research observations reveal that the very notion of a "hardcore" gamer is in part defined by the gamer's esoteric knowledge regarding new or obscure games, developments in the gaming industry, what games are played, etc. A gamer has to value and appreciate the medium, and accumulate a knowledge of videogames. To demonstrate this knowledge is to seek acceptance from others as an authentic member of the subculture. This is therefore a further example of "shared" values that both cement the coherence of the gaming subculture and mark it as distinct from "outsiders", as the "inside" knowledge of gamer subcultural capital is precisely a *value* that is shared by the subculture. To access and share in that knowledge is to become part of the subculture, and those without it are consigned to the outer darkness of "casual" gamers.

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When I posed the question of whether one can speak of a single gaming community, since there is such a diverse range of different games and game genres that attract different enclaves of people, Caveshen recognized that "there is definitely a difference" among gamers, while maintaining that anyone who plays videogames is essentially a gamer for participating in the activity. Nadine was also aware of this diversity and referred to the differences between players in the *Battlefield 3* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (which are both first-person shooters) communities:

> I guess so I mean they classify themselves as two different types of gamers. The *Battlefield* ones are more about teamwork, talking to people you play with and the *Modern Warfare* they say is more on your own, going solo. You don't really have to plan anything with their team. So I guess so.

In terms of gaming communities, Caveshen has participated in and been a part of the local South African *DotA* community. *DotA* (Defense of the Ancients) is a multiplayer online battle arena game where players battle one another strategically. The game has immense popularity worldwide and is followed by a broad range of fans with worldwide competitions and money prizes to be won. When asked about *DotA*, he stated:

> Ya. *DotA* players for example, it doesn't matter who you are, if you play *DotA*. The community tends to be, I hate to say this about them because I'm one of them, the misogynistic "get back in the kitchen" type of thing. They pick on females.

There is undoubtedly this subordination and belittling of women in some parts of the gaming subculture, and indeed the status of being male and having in-depth knowledge and understanding of the working mechanisms of the videogame are recognisable traditional values amongst gamers. Caveshen then referred to the *Xbox 360* community, which also has negative aspects, as one encounters a contingent of much younger teenage gamers who are seen to abandon social etiquette and embrace strong language, gender bullying and elitism above positive values. These negative values are embraced by these two gaming communities within the game called *DotA* and the console environment of the *Xbox 360*. These reactionary values, according to Graham, are also prevalent within the

Call of Duty community: "The *COD* community are a bunch of dicks if you ask me. There's elitism. Their main identity, they think they're better than everyone."

However, Caveshen states that whilst there are negative values instilled within the *DotA* and *Xbox 360* communities, there are also positive aspects:

> The *DotA* community, for example, are very driven. They enjoy having to play with other people that are of their skill level. They like challenges basically. And the *Xbox* community, for example, is just about fun. They don't care how good you are. They just want to have fun.

These positive values within the gaming subculture also include the shared appreciation of videogames, which is showcased by the depth of each gamer's appreciation be it for enjoyment of playing with someone of your own "skill level" in a game, or just having fun with other gamers in multiplayer matches. All of these factor into a genuine appreciation of videogames which differ greatly from gamers who casually play videogames. Caveshen referred to it as "social willingness" to actively participate in the community aspect of gaming. A gamer has to value and appreciate the medium, and accumulate a knowledge of videogames before their general acceptance as a gamer by other gamers is solidified. Therefore, despite these differences, I identified an underlying cohesiveness to the subcultural world of gamers.

However, there are different levels of acceptance, and for example Caveshen noticed regional differences in this regard:

> I've noticed that the city-wise communities have a different level of social willingness. I know a lot of Cape Town gamers like to do the whole LAN thing. They've not met you in person and they've known you for a few weeks or something. But they'll happily come over to your house and play games, and invite you to their house. Durban gamers are a little different. They stick to their friends and if it is a LAN and they try to know as much about the person before doing so. Or they just won't do it at all. They prefer to do it online, or to meet and talk about games. From my knowledge, I don't know much about the Joburg gamers. I know they're strong online. But I don't know much about them, in person, socially.

It is evident from what Caveshen outlines that the perceptions of gamers from city to city in South Africa differs in regards to social willingness to participate in sociable subcultural activities related to gaming. Caveshen notes that Cape Town gamers are more accommodating and participatory in their subcultural pursuits, whilst Durban gamers are more underground and isolated in terms of their subcultural activities, comparatively speaking. Lisa elaborated on Durban gamers:

> Durban is still getting there. It's definitely not as big. (It is) Between Joburg and *2UP* (a gaming event organised in Cape Town). *2UP* is massive. The people there are more receptive to coming out. I think the Durban guys are kind of scared and maybe (1) they don't know about (Durban events), or (2) they're too lazy. I don't know what it is. I'm hoping to encourage more people to come and have fun.

For Lisa, games are more than mere entertainment, and the gamer is "a part of it", a part of games, gaming and the industry.

Caveshen agreed and explained what he felt makes a gamer a true "gamer":

> I think it's the willingness to want to play games every day, and if they don't play games they feel incomplete with their day. It's just their dedication towards gaming. They will for instance want to talk about gaming all the time, and if they go out and have money their first thought is to spend it on games.

One can easily recognise that gaming for gamers is "life defining" and central to their identity. As Lisa said, "A lot of gamers have been very passionate from when they're so young. They develop such a general knowledge and such a passion for" videogames that their commitment is imprinted on their very identity. This point, however, bleeding as it does into the separate criterion of "commitment", will be examined later.

In summary, then, my research has clearly identified a "consistent distinctiveness" of values shared amongst serious hardcore gamers, and these involve a deep-seated passion for gaming that becomes all-consuming in their lives, and sets them apart from the more "casual" gamer defined by a light and part-time interest in gaming. More specifically, my research has revealed that amongst hardcore gamers there was an enthusiasm for gaming that goes beyond a seeking after entertainment, and instead involves a fervent attraction to the gaming experiences of immersion and interactivity.

b. Commitment

"Commitment" means for Hodkinson (2002: 31) *that subcultural activities can saturate, and dominate, members' entire lives*, invading their free time, determining their friendships, where they shop, what commodities they collect, where they go out, and internet usage. This type of concentrated dedication can be indicative of distinguishing subcultures from more "fleeting" cultural groupings. Although "commitment" can also be considered as one of the features of the "consistent distinctiveness" of a subculture, it nevertheless has its own weight and focus. I asked the research participants: "How deep is your everyday commitment to gaming?", and elaborated from there with further questions.

I quickly learned from my research that for hardcore gamers their dedication to gaming is a serious life commitment. Commitment is a shared value for many hardcore gamers because it largely defines who they are. The sheer number of hours per day that I witnessed hardcore gamers spending on gaming emphasised their deep commitment. Gaming – new game titles, for example - was also the main topic of conversation. "Commitment" factors into the "level of knowledge" that a gamer has - their subcultural capital. Caveshen defines this knowledge by saying, "It's this inbred knowledge that you can only have if you've played games. And then if you don't have it, it's easily identifiable". Displaying this "knowledge" to other gamers can be seen as a qualifying statement that you are a "gamer" because you demonstrate your knowledge in conversation, or other such situations.

This insider knowledge is easily one of the most important shared values among gamers, and is a consistent factor in considering who is and isn't a gamer at the subcultural core of gaming. Being considered a gamer, according to Caveshen, is about having the knowledge in order to be what gamers term a "hardcore gamer", and many revere this as the "true" ideal of what a gamer is and should be. This occult knowledge can only come from a massive and long-term commitment to gaming.

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As such, Caveshen stated that these types of gamers have a varied language discourse that differs from what they would consider "casual gamers", or in the subcultural sense "periphery members" of the overall gaming community:

> Gamers like to speak in memes (popular internet phenomenon), especially. They'll try their hardest with a lot of "awesomes" and hyperbole in their speech, and match something to a game. They'll use metaphors to compare something to a game, or relate something back into conversation to a game they played, for effect.

For Caveshen, gamers speak in this particular manner, relating everything to games, precisely "because gaming is such a big part of a gamer's life". Commitment to gaming saturates your life and as Caveshen points out, gamers dedicate much of their time to their passion:

> Well, I try to play games every day as much as possible and try to make time when possible. But there are other commitments with campus being one and *eGamer* (the gaming website he works for) articles being another, and sleep of course. Sleep just takes up so much of time and as far as possible I try to get in some gaming. I tend to play single-player for the most part. But if some friends are playing online then they'll call me and I'll play with them. I don't play with random people online. I stay away from that. So my single-player gaming is more predominant than my online multiplayer gaming with friends.

This type of commitment is typical, as my research revealed. Lisa relayed to me her own experiences of online gaming, specifically with the game series *Gears of War* (2006) and spoke about "game speak":

> I suppose there is a language because every day that we do the *Gears of War* post, people are like they're going to go and get their masher ready, and people who don't know *Gears of War* will not know that's a shotgun. So maybe there are certain phrases and things that you know. Also, in *Gears of War* what I find cool is that there will be phrases that will pop up in the game and we try and tease each other about that.

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Nadine, a female hardcore gamer, agreed that "game speak" is an important determining factor of whether a person can be validated as a "gamer" by other gamers:

> Well if you talk to someone and you go to the topic of gaming, or entertainment, or hobbies, or whatever and they say they play games. It easy to know if they're a casual gamer if they give you the "Oh yeah, *Modern Warfare*!" You know that's all they play, or *Need For Speed* or something. That's all they play.

Nadine recognised that distinguishing a person as a gamer is through the "things they mention", and gamers themselves are obviously more knowledgeable than those gamers on the periphery, who are normally considered casual gamers. Most of Nadine's gaming friendships were made through using the internet:

> Ya, and the thing is you know on the internet the people who I socialise with are gamers. They also keep up to date with the latest gaming news. I mean my friends who aren't on the internet so much, they don't keep up with the news. So talking to them, they don't really care about which games are coming up, or anything like that.

For Nadine, a true gamer is someone who knows what is happening in the current gaming "scene", and this is an expression of their explicit interest in gaming. Typically, casual gamers would not have this in-depth knowledge. Usage of the new media such as online forums, websites and social media is important in committing to your gaming passion. Other social commitments need to be worked in order to pursue gaming when necessary. Nadine schedules her social commitments around gaming, and adjusts her time accordingly. She sometimes has to work strange hours, and some days she is just too tired to play games; however, she makes up for lost gaming time when needed. Caveshen agreed with this sentiment saying, "You have to make time. Sometimes there's a joke, an old joke I guess, work, sleep, play. You have to sacrifice some time".

Both Nadine and Caveshen are noteworthy of having a heavy commitment towards gaming which is displayed in both their gaming knowledge and the amount of time they spend playing games. Spending time gaming is of the utmost importance to the point that even

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socialising with other friends who are gamers becomes incorporated into the actual gaming experience, as Caveshen explained:

> Well, online for example, if everybody's online *Xbox Live* we start up a party and we just sit, and everyone plays either their own game, or we play together. We chill and have a chat session. It's not serious at all. It's very relaxed and laid back. If we have to go to something in real life it will be the movies, again chilled laid back. Again, because we spend so much time around each other. It is okay we don't have to worry about formalities, and always communicating. It's just understood and comfortable togetherness. It needn't be dominated by conversation or something serious, or anything. It's just relaxed.

Commitment to gaming extends into how you interact with your friends online. If most of your gaming friends are available on one gaming console platform then socialisation, and talking to friends, becomes much easier as your gaming experience is not reduced. Comparatively speaking, this is not true of less hardcore gamers, or casual gamers, such as Trisha and Graham. Graham and Trisha rarely play videogames as they are full-time, and socially committed students, and it is only in their off-time away from campus life that they do pursue videogames as a pastime. It is not a centrally defining element of their lives, and that is where the difference in commitment lies between both hardcore and casual gamers. The level of dedication is actually finding the time to commit to something which others pursue as a "hobby", but you as a gamer pursue as something "necessary" to your own identity. This is not some extraneous factor to identity construction for gamers. It must be stressed that playing games is central and for many it becomes an essential aspect of their lives.

However, the factor of commitment is often in question when a female gamer comes into the fray. Commitment to gaming is questioned more often than not when the gender of a gamer comes into the equation. As Caveshen demonstrated:

> There are people who call themselves girl gamers. There's a difference. You're either a girl gamer or a gamer, and that represents the stigma that all gamers are male and that's not true. A lot of my friends have said this very comically: 90% of the world's gamers are male. That's not accurate at all. 42% of the world's gamers are female and by estimate of course. If somebody calls themselves a gamer then what they're saying is I play games and I am male, and I really play a lot of games. That's not true because you can get a female gamer, or a gamer who plays every now and again, and is casual. The improper usage of gaming and gamer is not on. I don't like that. I think it's very self-entitled.

The gender superstition held by many male gamers has much to do with perceptions by male gamers of gaming "belonging" to male gamers. The reality is that many women are gamers, as proven quite clearly in the development of this analysis, with great dedication towards gaming. They may not have the numbers that men do, but they are present in gaming communities across the globe. Female gamers like Nadine are passionately committed to their gaming, as she showed:

> I use Facebook primarily every day. I go to *eGamer*. I go to *MyGaming*, *EL33TONLINE*. What else is there? Sometimes I go to *PS3ZA* which is now *Lazygamer*. What other places are there? Ya, that's basically the ones I go to on a regular basis.

Nadine is constantly up-to-date with her gaming news and issues surrounding the industry. She knows what is happening in the videogames industry and has a greater knowledge than most casual gamers would. Lisa, who runs the South African gaming website *EL33TONLINE,* is a strong indication of the female element within gaming as a subculture, one that is helping to define the way in which the culture around gaming is changing. Female gamers are slowly becoming accepted into the gaming scene. Yet it is a slow progression. The truth is that gender is irrelevant when it comes to commitment in gaming, and is only an issue for male gamers who cannot stand change within the gaming

subculture. Change is inevitable and it is the fluid nature of gaming as a contemporary subculture that primes gaming for such change.

In summary, the criterion of "commitment" is so vital to the notion of subculture that it permeates the other criteria. Hardcore gamers were different from casual gamers because of the profound commitment they display towards gaming that not only took up an extraordinary amount of their time, but also had the effect of giving gamers high subcultural capital through the gaming knowledge they accumulated.

c. Identity

For Hodkinson (2002: 30-31), the criterion of "Identity" is where the researcher focuses on the extent to which the participants of a subculture hold *the subjective perception that they are "involved in a distinct cultural grouping and share feelings of identity with one another"*. Centrally what this does is help to define structural understanding from the perspectives of gamers themselves, who are internally involved in the "subculture" of gaming.

This criterion to a certain degree inevitably overlapped the previous criterion of "consistent distinctiveness", because so much of my evidence for that first characteristic came from gamers themselves – their subjective sense of themselves as distinctive members of an autonomous social grouping. Nevertheless, I chose here to showcase each participant's own individual "gaming" identities through an examination of what games they played, how they played them, and who they played with. This would help us to understand each participant's own *subjective* sense of group identity. I asked participants questions which included: "Do you feel a sense of longing and group identity with other gamers?" and "What type of gamer do you define yourself as?".

For example, Nadine's playing preferences include a great number of first-person shooters like *BioShock* (2007), *Killzone 3* (2011) and the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* franchise.

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She also plays roleplaying videogames like *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning* (2012) and *Mass Effect 3* (2012). What motivates Nadine to play games is that she finds the interactive storytelling in videogames to be attractive and she sees games as "beautiful" works of art. She enjoys the experience in videogames whereby your own choices reflect the outcome of the story in a game, and help in creating a sense of escapism that many gamers seek. Gamers share a subjective sense of group identity with one another when commonalities can be drawn upon, where gaming capital, such as your gaming history, become invaluable tools for positioning yourself in the subcultural structure.

Part of maintaining this subjective sense of group identity is through participating in the communal aspects of the overall gaming culture where gamers interact, such as online gaming communities. Nadine knows this very well and plays a host of multiplayer games online with friends such as *Killzone 3*, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2011) and *Uncharted 3* (2011). Subjectively, when she is online she clearly feels herself to be part of a specific gaming community, where she is recognized as a gamer, and where she enjoys the sociability of a shared subcultural reality. Subcultural gamers seek out other gamers in cyberspace, identifying with virtual communities that have the effect of strengthening and consolidating their subcultural identities.

Furthermore, this is what Nadine said about her experiences of online gaming communities:

> Well *Modern Warfare* I don't like the people playing. Like it's nice to play with friends. But when I'm playing internationally I don't like it all. It's all about I need to kill that person, and when you kill that person they throw a hissy fit. *Uncharted* is a lot of fun. You have a lot of laughs, and ya there's so many different things that can happen in *Uncharted* that it makes it fun to play with people who enjoy playing just for the fun of it. And *Killzone* that's also nice to play with friends. Internationally it's alright. You can't hear the teams speaking. So I never really know how they see the game.

Nadine here shows an in-depth knowledge of the inner-workings of online game communities and she understands the nuances of the interactions online, having had both

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negative and positive experiences there. As a result, she identifies quite clearly with the label of "hardcore gamer" more so than "casual", because of her great level of dedication towards gaming. She sees herself as a hardcore gamer, "Simply for the fact that I love games and I play a lot of games, and I play them to their fullest potential. I finish them. I follow the story. I don't just play an hour and that's enough, and then on to the next one".

For Nadine, in order for people to identify as gamers they need to be able "to get lost in the story" of a game, and "care about the characters" in the game to some extent, to validate their status as a "gamer". She said that she understood gamers better than "normal" people. Gaming is one of the main focuses in her free time as it is "her thing" that sets her apart from other activities that other people may do in their free time. Although Nadine expressed that gaming is not the "only thing her life" that defines her identity, to the degree that it might for other gamers. Other gamers may have the expectation that their fellow gamers within the subcultural structure have the same life defining view of videogames as themselves. There are subcultural identity expectations in the individual gamers' own sense of group identity and what their view of a gamer is. This is very similar to how non-gamers have expectations that older people should not be gaming. As Nadine said:

> Definitely, I generally don't tell people that I play games. Because you get that look that you're grown up now it's time to stop with those childish things. So I generally avoid the topic until the person knows me better. Then I'm comfortable telling them that I'm going to play a game this weekend.

Lisa, on the other hand, has much to say about the female gamer online experience:

> Well, most of the time everyone has been awesome. Most of the time, they don't know they're playing against a girl. But when you're talking they find out you're a girl and I find that generally the response is wow there's a girl playing. Generally you play with them every week and become less of a girl and more of a gamer, and you show that you're serious about it.

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However, while (negative) gendering may not have been typical of Nadines's experience of online gaming communites, other female gamers have had a very different experience because of the gender identity politics involved in a male-dominated culture that surrounds gaming. As mentioned before, Lisa works as a professional gaming journalist and from her experience there are varied perceptions of females within the gaming industry:

> Definitely, like I mean especially in this industry there's not that many game journalists that are girls. When you go to an event and you might be the only girl there. I don't know what other people feel about it, but I feel a little bit left out like I'm the only girl here. What do these guys think about me?.

Lisa said that she had a similar experience at an international gaming-related conference called *Captivate*, where she was one of three female journalists, out of sixty journalists from across the world. It is in these instances that Lisa feels a sense of exclusion because of her gender, and in turn leads her to experience a diminished sense of group identity. Lisa defines her gaming identity as such:

> I don't think I'm a hardcore gamer in the initial sense. I just like to play games for fun. If a new game comes out on Friday, I'll prefer to stay home and play the game. I'm not so hardcore I prefer to play games for fun. Like if friends come around, I'll choose a game that's fun for everyone.

She rather identifies with the label of "midcore" (to add a level of confusion to this analysis), because her time is spread across many other activities and interests. "I'm not going to sit there every night and play it", she said in reference to when she plays the game series *Gears of War*. However, Lisa does a feel a subjective sense of group identity when speaking to other gamers about videogames, where she clearly possesses the correct subcultural capital. She relates this to her experiences at gaming events where a game is revealed to the media: "It's like joining in the excitement of being involved in that. It's something you can't express", which is a commonality that she finds with other serious gamers.

Caveshen is also a gamer with specific tastes, and says:

> I like anything with a story. I like anything which is fun. Usually I tend towards roleplaying games (RPGs), first-person shooters, and third-person shooters. Basically action adventure games and RPGs, and puzzle games. I love puzzle games. Usually, a lot more story-oriented. I usually like games that can tell me a good story. I also like games that have me thinking. If you can make me think then you've won, and I very much enjoy games that have me managing some resource or element. For example an RPG, you manage your inventory and manage your character. You build them up and make them better. That element I suppose of having control of your character is a huge appeal.

Caveshen understands the subjective sense of group identity gamers have not only in a strictly virtual sense, as in the digital game worlds, but also in a physical sense. Caveshen confirmed that he indeed frequents actual gaming events, with less focus on network gaming parties (or LANs):

> Yes, I don't attend as many local LANs as I like to. I have been to LANs with friends. I've been to *rAge* though, last year, which is the premier South African gaming expo. And I attend *DBNGamers* meetups every month if I can. *rAge* is a huge expo. It's meant to showcase the upcoming games in the industry for that year. It's pretty much a showcase about what gaming is like to the world. Well to South Africa, anyway. *DBNGamers* is basically a meet and greet with local gamers with likeminded individuals who like to talk about their passion.

These are the gaming events which Caveshen frequents and provides a picture of the types of events that help in building a subjective sense of group identity for gamers. In these events, as expressed by Caveshen, there is a genuine camaraderie that is felt among gamers where gamers "talk about their passion", a passion which informs their own identity creation and relations with other gamers. Even if one gamer may have a differing viewpoint to your own, the extent of that gamer camaraderie and "passion" is very strong.

Caveshen provided a helpful perception of the actual structures of the communities which make up the gaming subculture. He referred to his experiences in the context of his experiences from both playing *DotA* and in the console community of the *Xbox 360:*

> The local *DotA* community is very cool. They're very elitist and there is a high learning curve for *DotA*, and so they are very intolerant people. But once you get to that level they are very accommodating of you. They will always make sure you're included. The *Xbox* community just wants to play games and have fun.

Caveshen admits that at one level gamers can be very accepting of other gamers in their chosen community, but only after the gamers have become entrenched within the chosen community and built up a reputation (or subcultural capital). Therefore there is an insider and outsider mentality present within the structure of gaming that is partly dependent on how you actively position yourself and your identity within this structure.

For Caveshen, these are the criteria for being a gamer:

> If you want to play games, you can't be afraid of technology and have to have some inclination towards being involved in your own story. It doesn't matter what game it is. It's going to be interactive so it needs you to want to take part. It's going to need some interest, some dedication, some sort of conviction in order to play a game, because if you start up a game and don't finish you're not doing it any justice really.

Caveshen argues that you need passion to identify as a gamer, a level of dedication and "conviction" when playing a videogame. For him, these factors are the essence of what it means to be a gamer.

When asked about whether he felt gender had implications for the identity of the gamer, he responded:

> It really shouldn't be. A lot of games cater to more of the male gamers than the females, unfortunately. It does mean that I see a lot, or a lot of tropes apply specifically apply to me, like a game will let's say have some sexualised female in it and that's going to do nothing for a female. But for a male gamer, it's oh cool that's nice to look at. I don't really care for it and I don't really want to be a part of that stigma for gamers.

Besides Caveshen's concerns regarding gender identity construction within gaming, he nevertheless points out that he still has "a sense of belonging" and "group identity" with other gamers, as he can "share" his experiences of games with other dedicated gamers. The gamer can achieve that "shared experience of gaming" through relating to other gamers because "they have been through what you've been through". In this way, gamers like Caveshen are able to acknowledge a subjective sense of group identity. It is a natural occurrence when gamers associate with other gamers, and it is defining feature of the way in which gaming communities are constructed. However, Caveshen maintained that while gamers should not feel separate from mainstream culture, some do inherently feel a rift between "normal people" (outsiders) and "gamers" (insiders). He explains this evident separation by explaining that:

> Well, okay, for example if some mainstream group had to experience something it would always be the same amongst them. But with gamers, there's usually a difference. For example, if I was playing the game and I was telling my friends about the game. They'd all have different experiences. So in that way we compare and laugh at somebody's mistakes, or appreciate someone else rising to a challenge. There's variety and difference, as opposed to mainstream where there isn't. That's pretty much it really. That's why it stands out because it's the way that no two people experience the same thing in a certain aspect.

This reiterates the point that gamers actively have a subjective sense of group identity that is supported by gaming culture's natural tendency towards communal-based activities, which stretch across both virtual and physical spheres of life.

Finally, when asked how he felt about how outsiders see him as a gamer, Caveshen stated that:

> I have to deal with this a lot. If you announce that you're a gamer there's a certain stigma attached to you and there's a checklist in everyone's brain, which goes he has that tick and he has that tick. So he must have this, that and the other. And it's unfortunate as gamers don't prescribe to that stereotype, and you have to sort of fight to break stereotypes when admitting you're a gamer. Which is why I tend to stick closer to the friends of mine who do play games. But there is some appreciation for the most part. The friends I keep who don't play games. They see it as something, a passion of mine, which is different to theirs where their passion could be I don't know something else. Watching TV, reading books or listening to music. It's just one of those things that I do and they don't.

There are gamers who do not fit strongly into the inner core membership of gaming. Gamers like Trisha and Graham are very casual in their commitment to gaming. Trisha, in reference to her gaming identity, said that she was a "part-time gamer" and is "casual" in her play. Graham supported this thread of argument by adding that "he is just a gamer really", and although he may be surrounded by "elitism" in the form of hardcore gamers, he regarded himself as "normal person". He supported this by saying that for him gaming was just a "hobby".

In summary, then, hardcore gamers clearly saw themselves as part of a gaming subculture, a community (online and offline) they enjoyed being part of, and one whose "elite" standards of game play drove them even deeper into the subculture and its practices in order to be recognized as a "serious" and successful player. Furthermore, their very identity was closely tied up with their gaming activities. Similarly, "casual" gamers recognised their distance from the centre of the subculture, a distance which also measured the level

of their interest and commitment. In some cases, female gamers felt the difficulties of being a woman in a male-dominated subculture.

d. Autonomy

Hodkinson (2002: 32-33) regards *both commerce and the media as crucially important to "the construction and facilitation of subcultures*": a sign of a substantial subculture is that subculturalists are themselves involved in commerce (running a shop selling subcultural goods, for example) and media (promoting or articulating the subculture, or a website community forum). Within this criterion, known as "Autonomy", the importance of different scales and types of media and commerce is essential. Inevitably, a subculture will be connected to the society and politico-economic system that it is situated in, while retaining a high level of subcultural autonomy. Questions asked included ones such as these: "If you are involved in a small company, website, or initiative, and are you doing so because of profit? Where do your interests lie?" and "Are you internally involved the gaming community/subculture (on a community level)?".

Looming everywhere in gaming research is the presence of videogame studios that develop games that are played by gamers. There was a difference between the subcultural (internal), albeit grass roots, approach of some independent videogame studios, and the more commercial studios backed by huge global publishers like Sony (external) that are solely profit-driven. Throughout the research process, independent videogame developers and studios (or indie studios) were interviewed to provide the "subcultural" (and "internal") perspective of the videogame industry. One of the most notable South African studios I interviewed are called *QCF Design*, and are renowned for their game, which is still in development, called *Desktop Dungeons.*

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Regarding the question of whether they were driven by profit in developing games, they said:

> It doesn't make sense to say we're an indie studio, and then go and make something for profit. Yeah, we're trying to survive and obviously we want to continue and succeed in making things, because we're making things that we believe in. But we're not trying to say at any point that "okay" we are designing by committee, as there are no publisher meetings.

This demonstrates a lack of interest in profits. For *QCF Design*, being creatively passionate in the development of their videogames is paramount. For them, videogame development starts "out as personal projects" and develops into a business venture only much later down the line.

For young indie developers, the main objective is not profit, but to get exposure, much like Marco and Paul from *Learn3D* during *rAge* 2011. As Marco says:

> I think the main thing is exposure. You know getting out there and helping to grow the industry. Right now I'm a student and I'm not interested in profits. One day as a professional I pray I'll be doing this professionally. But right now I'm in it for exposure and fun. Get out there and I've always wanted to do it. I want my dreams to come true.

Paul added that his own present concerns lie with developing a game which plays well and has great game design, and that profitability is a long term goal and a hopeful eventuality. As young developers, they want to get their game design ideas out there and brand themselves, before making a profit is in the picture. For them, developing an indie game is a personal affair which develops into a full-fledged pursuit of passion, and a genuine personal expression made by a gamer for other gamers.

As Paul said:

> Well, it's the best way because if you're a gamer you know what other gamers want, theoretically. You kind of know what they want so it's easy to develop for a gamer. You can test it out and see where the flaws are. You know what's wrong with your own game.

It is through this subcultural identification that indie game developers such as Paul and Marco can express their own individuality through games because they understand their audience and themselves as "gamers". Sven, another young indie developer had much to elaborate upon in this regard:

> I started making games when I was younger because I love the concept of making a world that doesn't exist. Being able to interact with that and being able to walk around and you can tell the world whatever to be, what it wants, which is something I always wanted to do.

There is immense freedom in pursuing the career path of an indie developer that other career paths in the gaming industry may not so fully cater to. In the South African context, indie game design is attractive because of the lack of bigger videogame studios in the region.

The reality, as *QCF Design* argued, is that the videogames industry consists of: "shades of grey, bell curve pattern, and you really do have to make sure that you never pull too far in one direction because that is unhealthy for any sorts of games company". This means work for *QCF Design* has to be both financially stable and personally fulfilling to be a success, as the industry is constantly in fluctuation. Being independent from a major studio or publisher means that members of *QCF Design* are developing videogames on their own terms, and for them it is more about passion than profit. They are not just game developers, but are also gamers who have a passion for gaming. *QCF Design* emphatically stated, "Look we're definitely gamers. You can be a games developer without being a gamer, but you're missing out if you're not playing games". They demonstrate a link to being "gamers" that develop games as a means of expressing their passion, and this makes them connected subculturally to the gaming subculture. This passion is evident in independent

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developers like Sven, who finds the medium, as *QCF Design* do, to be a place where you can freely express yourself, as Sven says, "Your videogame is designed by you, plays how you want it to, and has characters and a world made by your very hands". Both Sven's and *QCF Design* have imperatives which are not commercial by nature, but rather one of personal dedication to gaming. They acknowledged that there was a disparity between studios and publishers, as *QCF Design* pointed out:

> I'm just going to say the publishing model in general. It's something that's not cool. I mean you see big studios make these amazing games and then you know the publisher is the one making all the money, and they didn't put nearly as much work in as the creatives. And that bothers me.

Despite the publishing model in place in major video game publishing, *QCF Design* pursued the much harder route in independently releasing their own games where the core team behind a game is directly involved in all aspects of videogame creation, development and publishing. As there are "only three core developers" on the *Desktop Dungeons* project this means that there is very little "dilution" of creative control. *QCF Design* have been unsupported by a major publisher or third party in the process of developing their game.

Ironically, according to Sven, now there are support measures in place for aspiring indie developers. Sven explained that indie developers who are part of the local branch of the IGDA (International Game Development Association) in South Africa have found support from *Microsoft*, a huge corporation within the videogames industry. Sven explained that *Microsoft* are supportive of all game design communities, and that there are close to ten communities that meet on regular basis at a venue provided by the software and hardware giant.

South Africa's subcultural gaming media is mostly made up of independent gaming websites such as *eGamer* (egamer.co.za), *MyGaming* (mygaming.co.za), *EL33TONLINE* (el33tonline.com), *Lazygamer.net* (lazygamer.net), *ZOMBIEGAMER* (zombiegamer.co.za) and *ITF Gaming* (itfgaming.com), where gaming developments are

discussed, and new games reviewed. Opportunities for discussion ensure that these websites also play a role in maintaining the gaming subculture by supporting virtual communities of gamers. Gaming magazines produced in South Africa are limited to *NAG* (New Age Gaming) and *PC Format*. However, *PC Format* is centered explicitly on PC hardware and the PC modding scene rather than actual gaming, which is a minor focus. Therefore *NAG* is really the only paid-for gaming magazine published in South Africa, and relies upon advertising and subscription costs. *NAG*'s editor Michael James had much to say about the magazine. When asked about why *NAG* is so successful in South Africa, James said:

> I think it's because we always look after our readers. They're a top priority. We never try and sell out, or pander to advertisers, that type of thing. We just know that's our approach, and they trust our opinion, and we only hire the best people for the magazine. In terms of the pedigree of the journalists there, they've been experienced guys and they've been writing for years, and they know gaming backwards. So we know the best, and we always give our readers the best. It's a complicated question. It's a lot of different things.

NAG magazine is essentially gamers writing about gaming, and focuses its content strictly on the interests of its readers, made up of many hardcore gamers. According to *NAG*'s editor, most of the staff are experienced gamers who bring passion to the content that they produce for *NAG*. *NAG* has great variety in its writing staff and all of them are from very different backgrounds, as James points out:

> All of them have been playing games since they could play games. Some of them are more experts in like the *Nintendo* side of things, and others are more expert in the first- person shooters. Other guys are RTS (real time strategy) experts. Other guys are community experts. So it's like sort of a balance, but it's happened naturally. Naturally people have come to us.

The magazine itself came to fruition from a passion for gaming and a gap in the market at the time of inception. It has developed into a popular publication with the magazine circulating close to 33 000 copies in 2011. Even the biggest gaming expo in South Africa

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called *rAge*, and hosted at the Coca-Cola Dome in Johannesburg, started off as a marketing exercise for *NAG*. It was a way for *NAG* to attract more people to gaming, and expand the reader base of their magazine. *rAge* has become its own entity now, and it is an open platform for all the gaming press to be at, which includes many South African gaming websites, such as those mentioned before. Whilst *rAge* may be trying to appeal to a broader audience than merely hardcore gamers, it does also cater to hardcore gamers by hosting one of the biggest professional gaming competitions, with the *Telkom Do Gaming League,* and LANs (Local Area Network Parties) in South Africa. Michael James knows that the hardcore gaming crowd is difficult to cater for at a mainstream event such as *rAge*, but nonetheless the hardcore gaming crowd still has a place at the event. Not only that, *rAge* holds cosplay events, where participants dress up in costumes fashioned after their favourite characters from popular culture (which consists of anime, videogames, etc.). The event encompasses competitive play, cosplay, technology, publishers, developers and gaming press. The whole point is that every year the South African gaming community is brought together, and it is a space where gaming culture is freely expressed without social stigma.

The independent gaming websites and *NAG* are equally subcultural in their approach to both subcultural employment and being motivated by a love for gaming. My own experiences of independent gaming websites extends from my work experience at a website called *eGamer*. I work on the website in an editorial capacity, writing features, columns and many different types of articles. Within this new territory, I have gained new insights into the actual local gaming scene in South Africa. I learn about the community and I am privy to a more interior perspective about the world of gaming than the ordinary gamer. Websites such as *eGamer* directly discuss gaming-related issues and communicate with gamers on a regular basis. This was my experience most clearly. I found that all the staff participating in *eGamer* were doing so for utter passion, with no true ulterior motives.

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Caveshen, who is also a staff member of *eGamer*, said that:

> It's for the passion. We don't get paid at *eGamer*. We do get games, but that's not what it's about. But sometimes bad games really outweigh the good games. So it's not really about the material gain that's derived from it. It's more about having a voice and being able to express that interest in gaming and being able to create something where gamers can say hey here's my place online. I'm going to see here and talk about games.

Besides the range of South African gaming websites and the premier gaming magazine in *NAG*, there were two TV shows focussed on gaming that were broadcast on *DStv*. These two shows were *PlayR* and *The Verge*, and were hosted by Pippa Tshabalala, a female gaming journalist, lecturer and media personality in South Africa. *The Verge* and *PlayR* were produced due to a gap in the market identified by the production team that Tshabalala was hired by, mainly *Don't Look Down Productions*, who produce TV shows for the *DStv* channel *Vuzu*. The idea of both *The Verge* and *PlayR*, according to Pippa, was to expose a broader audience to videogames in the belief that people who have not found the "right game" to play yet could find games to enjoy through the two TV shows. The hope with *The Verge* primarily was to bring the world of videogames to people's homes with great immediacy every week, at a quicker pace than print magazines. Both TV shows were on the air for nearly five years running until mid-2012, before *DStv* re-branded the *Vuzu* channel.

The shows attempted to showcase as much content as possible from a variety of videogame platforms, while combating the free availability of South African gaming websites which dominated much of the space for the core gaming audience. The reality was that both *The Verge* and *PlayR* were attempting to cater to a mainstream audience that was only mildly interested in videogames and the industry. Hardcore gamers felt alienated by this audience focus and the show only last four short years because of a lack of community involvement. Tshabalala pointed out that *The Verge* had importance through being able to give gamers a sense of community, and to create a broader appeal to gaming. Yet, the only notable community involvement from *The Verge* happened when Tshabalala attended the rAge Expo in both 2010 and 2011, and became involved in the biggest gaming event in South

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Africa. Yet their appeal still lay with mainstreaming gaming culture for a youth-oriented audience, and eventually both *The Verge* and *PlayR* had their final showings in 2012. The success of both *The Verge* and *PlayR* came down to appeal and ratings, and whilst mainstream appeal may have been the two shows' focus, the hardcore gaming crowd weren't truly catered to. Add to this, the fact that the show was only available to *DStv* subscribers, and that uncapped broadband internet was becoming more affordable during 2011 to 2012, and it is no wonder that both *The Verge* and *PlayR* were cancelled. Independent gaming websites and *NAG* have been more successful because they pay attention to the core gaming audience, that of hardcore gamers.

Without independent videogame developers, magazines and gaming websites in the South African landscape the viability of gaming as subculture, and a community, would not be as well defined. Subcultural media and the commerce generated by these outlets in the association of media platforms with gaming stores like *BT Games* at local events such as the *rAge* expo is of central importance. It helps gamers identify who are the players in the local gaming industry and brings together the community into a unique position where both commerce and the media mix together. These relationships owe much to the consumer culture ethos behind gaming as subculture, which has propelled gamers to attach deeper meanings to what many deem a mere consumer product, the videogame. What can be seen here is a clear demonstration of how gaming as a subculture, and a business, can be intertwined and create support for both the gaming community at large, and the business interests in the gaming industry. *rAge* expo is an extremely good example of this cohesion in South Africa, as all gamers from across South Africa come together, and the gaming retailer businesses come together under one roof in the Coca-Cola Dome.

The "Autonomy" criterion turned out to be an important aspect of the gaming subculture, particularly in its identification as a "subculture of consumption". Against the study of Hebdige, who argued that subcultures are exterior and resistant to commerce and the media, postmodern subcultures are deeply caught up in both from the very beginning (Thornton, 1995). As an extreme example of an "active audience" that fabricates its own world of meanings and practices and institutions instead of passively relying upon dominant

meanings and practices, the gaming subculture interestingly *uses* capitalism for its own subcultural ends, in much the same way that Fiske (1989) said audiences actively *use* films and TV programmes to construct autonomous meanings. Hence Hodkinson's carefully chosen term, "autonomy". To work within a subcultural space is an act against that alienation and anomie so central to labour within capitalism; it is not only to create *leisure*, but also to create *work*, on your own terms.

As my study has shown, contemporary subcultures such as gaming create vast economic networks – shops, online sites, magazines, games themselves, etc. – that are nevertheless not stripped of that human meaningfulness that Marx identified with the dominance of exchange-value. The *culture* of gaming, we might say, dominates these economic activities, and thus produces a haven for those unhappy with the offerings of the mainstream.

5. Conclusion

Introduction - Gaming Illuminated And Revealed

We can conclude that there is a rather rich presence of both subcultural media and commerce in the South African gaming subculture. Emerging from the research data was the central idea that gamers *define their own subculture*, its structure, its lifestyle, and what it means to be a "gamer". This is one of the most valuable aspects of subcultural research, the recognition that these micro-worlds, including the vital structures of ongoing *sociality* and the shared meanings circulating within the subculture, are entirely the voluntary creation of the subculturalists themselves, these "active consumers" who invent cultural worlds around acts of consumption. When critical academic attention is focused on centres of oppressive power located in the State or in the offices of corporations, it misses this grass-roots creativity and unwillingness to simply follow the "mainstream" by subculturalists, who on the whole bring an enormous passion and commitment to the micro-world they create and inhabit. It is a passion that is often missing in the alienating structures of corporate and bureaucratic environments. The postmodern assumption that contemporary subcultures are impetuously fluid has therefore proved to be only partially appropriate when applied to gaming as a subculture.

Another interesting result from the collected data was the realisation that gamers are directly involved in the videogames industry as videogame developers, and that the gaming community is involved in a conversation with videogame developers, studios and publishers. The reality is that gamers are a part of a subculture which is defined by the videogames industry; however, gamers simultaneously also have a direct effect on the videogames industry itself. For these intensely committed gamers, however, buying a game is not only leisure, as it no doubt is for most of those millions who play games. For the

members of this subculture, it is finally about fashioning an appropriate identity for oneself, and what more serious a game is that?

Research Conclusion

After conducting research over a two year period, I was privy to a handful of gamers, some who labelled themselves as hardcore, and those who identified with a term they called "midcore" and others who identified with gaming on a casual basis, otherwise known as casual gamers. Three words were continually presented throughout the participants' responses, "passion, dedication and commitment". One could argue that dedication and commitment are the same thing. But they are interrelated processes, whereby passion is the express product of gaming. From my own research in South Africa, I discovered that gamers play games because they're passionate about the medium. Of course, they are passionate in different ways. Some gamers are passionate about games for competitive reasons and seek enjoyment from that, others play games for pure entertainment and escapism. This is a shared reality for many gamers.

Commitment was essential to understanding gamers, and when conducting research I came to an understanding that the most passionate and dedicated gamers allow videogames to saturate their entire lives, where free time in a busy schedule, due to social commitments, was opened up for playing games. The life-defining quality of games differed from research participant to research participant; but there, however, remained a commonality that games represented an object of central importance to the gamer. When a gamer actively labelled him or herself as a "gamer" it was evident that gaming was important to them, that it was more than some fleeting trend or hobby. To the most passionate and dedicated of gamers, games formed part of their own identity construction.

Following an examination of gaming culture at the level of the gamer, I ventured into new territory and asked independent game developers and gaming media what they felt about the industry and their relations to gamers. A strong number of independent developers revealed that they themselves were gamers and that the gaming community is constantly involved in a conversation with videogame developers, studios and publishers. Although some major videogame publishers and studios may be less interested in the concerns of the gaming public, there have been major cases such as with videogame studios like *Valve* and *Bioware* where gamer input has proved to be of the utmost importance in maintaining a good relationship with the gaming public. Independent developers are normally grass-roots affairs and generally rely on the gaming public to support their projects, and so a continual conversation between such developers and gamers is overall beneficial to both parties in producing a polished finished product (the videogame itself) that sells well. The gaming media interviewed expressed an importance in the role of gamers in the industry, most notably in the print media where good relations and subcultural support from the larger gaming community was needed to keep such publications afloat. Online media such as independent subcultural websites were a different beast altogether, and proved to have their own well sustained communities that formed out of commonality and support among a community of like-minded gamers.

Furthermore, the realisation I came to in the final analysis was that gamers define the games industry to a great degree. They are seen as a valuable source of information by the marketing teams of major videogame studios, as a feedback mechanism of quality control in indie videogame development, and as a community of support and financial stability for much of the gaming-related media. However, the industry influences the gaming public as well. This is by no means one-way, but is dialectical. Yet the underlying idea that I learnt through this process is that gamers no matter how negative or positive their actions, particularly in the online realm, are a product of a passion and dedication to gaming.

Final Conclusion

One can conclude that this research thesis has successfully identified *how* serious "hardcore" gamers, individuals who play videogames with a serious passion and dedication, manifested themselves as an authentic contemporary subculture in South Africa. This is a subculture with a self-imposed hierarchy confined to a cohesive group of dedicated gamers who helped to largely form what defined a gamer. Owing to the translocal nature of gaming as a subculture the demonstration of dedicated passion among dedicated gamers was universal, and not only contextual to the South African locale. As stated in the introduction, the study was not interested in games as texts, that is, their semiotic or other textual analysis to reveal their meanings and themes. Instead with this thesis my own research interest was seriously vested in a community of lived experiences that developed around the acts of gaming (playing videogames), a subculture with its own interests, dynamics and boundaries that differentiated itself from others. This was undeniably proven to be a reality.

Why I specifically focused on gaming in a subcultural sense, owed much to my academic background in studies revolving around culture, subculture and consumerism. I embedded myself in the gaming subculture and the industry itself, participating and taking on an editorial role at a local gaming website called *eGamer*. I came into contact with many local game developers, met other gamers with the same vested interests as my own and began to identify and understand the structure of gaming culture, and found there did indeed exist a gaming subculture. It was, however, not as I had perceived it to be, as shown in the general research conclusion. Where I had taken a postmodern perspective of gaming in South Africa as this freely permeable "hobby" that many people partook in, I was proven to have been wrong in my initial assumptions. Gaming in South Africa is marked by defining structures, by a dedicated core of serious gamers for whom videogames are central to a *lifestyle* and are integral in many of their social activities. Over the course of my tenure in the local gaming scene, I have published many articles on *eGamer*, and have attempted to

conceptualise hardcore, casual gamers and actually define what a gamer is. The problem herein lies with the lack of coherence within the cultural paradigm of gaming, and the inter-subjectivity of gamers themselves. A definitive element of what defines gamers and gamers in South Africa is that serious gamers do *impose* a self-defined hierarchy on gaming structurally, and this was proven to be vital to the subculture's structure shown in the assertions made in the thematic analysis, and research conclusion. I conducted research using Hodkinson's (2002) model aptly named the "Four Indicators of (Sub)Cultural Substance" and found this hierarchy to be most prevalent. It came to light particularly when researching the criteria of consistent distinctiveness and commitment, which dictates that varying groupings, across the globe, from within a subculture should have *a set of shared tastes and values which are distinctive from those of other groups*. Inclusively in this process, s*ubcultural activities can saturate, and dominate, members' entire lives*, as in gaming-related activities dominating a gamer's life. It was found that gamers in South Africa were not only identified by shared tastes and values that are immediately apparent, but by their passion, commitment and dedication. Gamers who actively label themselves as "gamers" and identify with the communal aspects and subcultural structures of gaming are deeply affected by gaming experiences, and see games as a serious life commitment that defines who they are as a person. *Recognition* as a gamer is necessitated by a knowledge of videogames and an ability to express that innate knowledge that the gamer has developed. That knowledge is a sign of having shared values of passion, commitment and dedication for gaming. A *gamer* is a part of the games industry, of videogame development and the overarching gaming community.

But I want to take this a step further and argue that these types of gamers are *subculturalist gamers* who partake in a wide range of core activities intertwined in the gaming experience. This type of gamer, I have made academic sense of, does not merely play many games for long periods of time. Instead, they participate socially in the local gaming scene, are involved in websites, forums, frequent local events, have friends who are gamers, run their social circles with gamers, read gaming-related material and the like. This fits into the criterion of commitment and consistent distinctiveness without fault. Gaming is not seen

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as an activity, but a lifestyle choice that consumes great amounts of time and requires high levels of dedication and passion to maintain. This very notion informs identity construction, as shown in the thematic analysis section concerned with the criterion of identity. "Identity" was where subculturalists needed to have *a sustained subjective sense of group identity*, which can be clearly identified by the researcher. In my case, identifying this *subjective sense of group identity* was made much easier as my research was composed of the actual personal accounts of South African gamers, members of the gaming press and independent game developers. In this section of the analysis, gamers spoke at length about their personal experiences with games and their feelings towards gaming on a personal level. Much of the social side of gaming and how gamers interact were expressed by participants. In a minor capacity, the section dealt with gender identity construction within the gaming subculture and its prevalence as a negative after-effect of the male dominated nature of gaming. This demonstrated much of the negative qualities of the gaming subculture and its problems as a result. But serious gamers are vehemently dedicated to gaming above other social commitments, whilst more casual gamers do participate in mainstream activities above and beyond casual gaming. There do exist many exceptions. Yet I was concerned with the core of *subculturalist gamers* and took notice that said gamers did have a *sustained subjective sense of group identity* and felt camaraderie with other gamers.

Finally in the analysis, I dealt with "Autonomy" which is the crucial importance of both commerce and the media in "the construction and facilitation of subcultures". In this section of my analysis, I examined data recorded from interviews and focus groups with independent game developers and members of the gaming press. It was here that I realised the dialogue that occurs between gamers and the videogames industry. Independent game developers, or indie developers as they are known more popularly, spoke about dealing with making a profit and simultaneously pursuing their desire to make videogames, which is a central passion for them. These indie developers are producing their own games out of love for the medium, and a passion and dedication to it. It was revealed that these indie developers were gamers, and recognised themselves as such. By extension, the passion to

make games came from their very nature as gamers, and playing videogames drove them into a career pursuit in videogame design. Indie developers who were interviewed expressed deep interest in videogames from a very young age that culminated into their current career choices and paths. Independent developers are involved in the *commerce* of videogames and help to facilitate the construction of the subculture, and have become the drivers of innovation and creativity in the videogames industry at present.

In addition, I focussed on the subcultural media structures that underpin the gaming subculture in South Africa, within the "Autonomy" section. I interviewed the Editor-In-Chief of a major South African gaming magazine and a well-known media personality who offered an interior perspective of the games industry as it stands in South Africa. I took interest in independent subcultural media, which is base layer of support for many developers, publishers and distributors in the local videogames industry. Different levels of media are considered by gamers as conduits for knowledge and news about games, learning about the ins and outs of the industry at a very fundamental level. Michael James, the Editor-In-Chief of *NAG*, a local South African gaming magazine, expresses the importance of media in spreading the "word" about gaming and increasing the popularity of gaming in the public's eye. *NAG*, according to James, was built on passion and a love for gaming, and makes it an autonomous subcultural industry.

Local independent gaming websites, as listed in the thematic analysis, do much for the local gaming subculture by creating spaces where communities can virtually congregate and discuss videogames in various capacities, such as in the comments section of an article, a *YouTube* video, or a website's dedicated discussion forum. This in the larger scheme helps to maintain the local South African gaming subculture and its multitude of online communities.

In television, I spoke to Pippa Tshabalala who presented two dedicated gaming-related TV shows on *DStv*. Tshabalala provided insight into the experiences of running *PlayR* and *The*

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Verge which tried to bring the gaming world to a mainstream audience, whilst still appealing to the more serious core of the gaming subculture. Ultimately the TV shows met their demise in 2012, owing to a lack of consideration for the core audience (that of the serious gamers). The gaming press proves to be a vital component of marketing videogames and generating discussion revolving around gaming. However, traditional forms of media are proving to be a relic of the past as the future of gaming-related media is very much on online platforms, such as independent gaming websites. These websites are vehicles for varied discussions and points of views that are expressed by writers from all types of backgrounds. What cannot be denied is the importance of these avenues in the gaming media in sustaining and providing support for the games industry and its continuing proliferation.

Gamers, and the gaming subculture, are therefore representative of a *subculture of consumption*. Gamers in South Africa, much like their global counterparts, have built and maintained a subculture around gaming. However, this type of subculture is a blend of both the postmodern schools of thought and the modern schools of thought in subcultural analysis. This mixture of postmodern flexibility and structural hierarchy from the modern school of subcultural theory places gaming in a unique position as a subculture. Consequently, gaming as subculture fits perfectly into the concept of a subculture of consumption. Gamers generate their own subcultural meanings in the "cultural economy" which is autonomous of the interests of videogame publishers and distributors who seek profit. This thesis has proved that gamers define the industry to a larger extent than expected and are in s direct relationship with the developers behind games and the subcultural media who supports local communities, as found in South Africa. Whilst major financial power remains in the hands of game distributors and publishers, gamers and the gaming subculture are vital in generating financial stability for the industry as a whole. They are after all the ones purchasing games and driving the industry forward.

Thus it is applicable to speak of gaming as a "subculture of consumption" which, as stated before, Schouten and McAlexander (1995: 43) define as "a distinctive subgroup of society

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that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity", in which "people identify with certain objects or consumption activities and, through those objects or activities, identify with other people." (1995: 48). As mentioned, it is inevitable that a subculture may be born from within modern consumerism, as it is a place where media and commerce intersect. This very notion of media and commerce is integral the perpetuation of videogames and their popularity. Labelled as "Autonomy" in Hodkinson's (2002) model, commerce and media proved to be of vital importance in the long term maintenance and creation of the gaming subculture, in both its local capacity as shown in this thesis, and on a global scale.

In conclusion, indubitably gaming, and gamers, in South Africa can be viewed as an authentic contemporary subculture. Gaming as a subculture in South Africa was born out of the act of consumption of a mere product, which is the videogame. It is through the pursuit of common consumption interests that participants in a *subculture of consumption* create distinctive, yet at the same time fragmented, subcultures of consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2005: 873). This, in turn, helps to explain the commonalities and variations of the gaming subculture from across the globe. It also simultaneously confirms the central imperative of this thesis which was to identify how serious *hardcore* gamers manifested themselves as an authentic contemporary subculture, a contemporary subculture which so happens to be, as shown throughout, a subculture of consumption.

For Hebidge (1979) of *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, it would of course be an oxymoron to write of a "subculture of consumption", since subcultures were by definition youthful proletarian resistances to capitalism, in particular to the lures of the mass media and commodification. What my thesis has therefore also captured is the transition into postmodernity for subcultures and their studies, of how the economic and the cultural, as Jameson (1984) had argued, have moved much closer together, so that culture can no longer be imagined romantically as the site of a radical otherness to capitalism. But this does not necessarily mean, as many Jameson-inspired deeply pessimistic accounts of postmodernism have concluded, that "subcultures of consumption" are merely social

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groupings rounded up by advertising and dedicated to the fetishism of commodities. Such a manipulationist analysis ignores the extent to which these postmodern subcultures are largely the creation of subculturalists themselves, who have collectively fabricated and sustained subcultural meanings and sociality around a digital media form which by definition has no place for a passive audience, and instead relies upon consumer "interactivity" with the game. Furthermore, in their sustained passion and commitment for the activity of gaming, and its intense experiences of "immersion" and "interactivity", gamers act otherwise to the more negative appraisals of the postmodern as a "depthless" skipping from one capitalist-manufactured fashion to another. What my research has shown is that there is indeed an authentic "depth" to gaming subculture, which precisely marks out its "resistance" to postmodern capitalist culture.

Future Research Considerations

In the pursuit of future research interests, I would investigate gaming culture more broadly than as demonstrated in this thesis, perhaps by examining more clearly the dynamic structures of gaming culture in its various other elements. Particularly I would preferentially analyse the online environment that dominates much of gaming culture, and is a defining aspect of the various social interactions and forms of identity construction that occur across the board. These include online multiplayer games where players can create avatars to represent their own identity, or in military-based first-person shooter games where squads (also known as clans) come together on a regular basis to compete against other teams in online matches. These would provide a diverse perspective into the inner-workings of gaming, as an online subculture and community-based culture. Analysing the *act* of gaming and sites of online gaming would be the next step in achieving a broader overview of gaming culture and its subcultural underpinnings.

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7. Appendix A – Informed Consent Form

Dear [participant]

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. Your involvement is much appreciated. This study forms part of my Masters dissertation entitled ***The Rise of the Gamer – An Analysis of Gaming as a Subculture of Consumption in Durban*** at UKZN, Howard College. The main objective of the study is to determine whether video gamers make up a subculture that is defined by video gaming.

Your participation will involve you participating in an un-structured interview, or focus group. The questions will relate to your understanding and opinions of video gaming, and whether it is a subculture. Information collected from the interview will remain strictly confidential, and a pseudonym will be used when referring to you. After the research is complete, all data and answers will be stored away at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Your participation will occur at a time and place that is convenient to you. Involvement in the research will take approximately one or two hours. You will not receive any financial rewards for your participation.

If you choose to refuse to participate, then you will not be at any disadvantage. Similarly, you may choose to withdraw at any point during the research and this will not disadvantage you in any way. You will not be expected to justify or explain your reasons for withdrawal.

If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor:

Adam Meikle   Supervisor: Professor J-P Wade
0737962172
adamdavid@telkomsa.net   E-mail address: wade@ukzn.ac.za
                                                            Department: MECS, MTB Building, UKZN

Many thanks,
Adam Meikle

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DECLARATION:

I…………………………………………………………………………….(full names of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand that I am taking part in this project voluntarily. I also understand that I am free to refuse to answer any questions and am also free to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire, and that doing so will not have negative consequences for myself.

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT: DATE:

8. Appendix B – Interview Questions

General Interview Questions

Consistent Distinctiveness

1. What is the difference between the gaming community in South Africa at present, and in the past (over the past 5 years)? Are there consistencies across the changes?
2. What attracts people to videogames?
3. What types of games have you noticed have risen in popularity?
4. Do you feel that different types of games have different subcultures/communities attached to them, and if so are they different or similar?
5. What are the gaming communities like? Are they relatively similar, or different? (like Durban, Johannesburg, Cape Town etc).
6. What is the real life gaming community like, in comparison to the online version?
7. How do you understand that someone else is a gamer? What are the signs?
8. What makes gamers distinctive from other people? Is it knowledge, taste and choice of language which are distinctive indicators that a person is a gamer?
9. Can it be seen in their type of clothing, or is something more amorphous/ephemeral?
10. Then, do you think gamers have a shared set of values distinctive from other groups? If so, what do you believe these values to be?
11. In what way are gamers a type of community/subculture?

Identity

12. What kind of videogames fit your preferences?

13. Why are these types of videogames your favourite?

14. Do you attend gaming events, such as LANs, competitions (extra group identity activities), etc?

15. Are you involved in online gaming?

16. If so what are online gaming communities like?

17. What type of gamer do you define yourself as?

18. What are the criteria for being a gamer?

19. How does your gender define you as a gamer?

20. Do you feel a sense of longing and group identity with other gamers?

21. Is your feeling of group identity strong enough to make you feel different to mainstream society (as separate from mainstream society)?

22. How do you think non-gamers see you as a gamer (as an outsider)?

Commitment

23. How deep is your everyday commitment to gaming? (How often do you play games, the time you spend per day, both real and online?)

24. Are your friends also gamers, real and online?

25. How do you socialise with other gamers (in the real and online world)?

26. Is it important for you to go to regular gaming sessions with friends?

27. Do you regularly buy gaming magazines and associated content?

28. Do you regularly go to gaming websites (with what frequency?)?

29. What is the gaming scene like in South Africa?

30. How do people manage to play games, whilst they have social commitments?

31. Do you perceive yourself as a gamer wholly, or a multifaceted individual?

32. Is the label of 'gamer' more a deterrent and a countermeasure used to protect the credibility of gamers whom consider themselves 'hardcore', and exclude those they consider 'casual'? (Perceptions of insiders and outsiders)

33. Or do you think the boundary between casual and hardcore gamers is slowly shifting and taking root in different directions? (postsubcultural notion)

Autonomy

34. In what other ways are you involved in the gaming community? (events, forums and websites). How often do you use these platforms within said communities?

35. If you are involved in a small company, website, or initiative, and are you doing so because of profit? Where do your interests lie?

36. Are you internally involved the gaming community/subculture (on a community level)?

37. Or are you interested in the external interests of companies (non-subcultural with products and services, like publishers and technology companies)? What are you relationships like with these companies, etc?

Specific Interview Questions

Questions for Media

1. Why was your publication/show started? And when?
2. Why was your website started? And when?
3. Are you motivated by profit in producing your publication? Or is it for other reasons as well?
4. Is your interest in gaming what motivated you to start your publication? Are you motivated by gamers and the gaming scene?
5. Do you feel as if you have a commitment to gamers?
6. How did you start the magazine?
7. What are the backgrounds of most of the staff at *NAG*? Are most of them gamers?
8. How would you position the magazine in terms of scale (in the market)? (Is *NAG* a micro, macro or niche in term of its market and readership?).
9. What do you feel is *NAG*'s position in the local gaming scene?
10. To what extent is *NAG* (and other similar publications) vital to the gaming community (gamers)?
11. Do you believe that your publication helps sustain the gaming community as a community?
12. What have been the public's reactions to the magazine? Does the magazine/website have a loyal readership?
13. What is the purpose of *rAge*? Is it a natural extension of *NAG*?
14. How do gamers view *NAG* (relate it to the website perhaps)?
15. What is the community around *NAG* like (website, forums etc)?
16. Is *NAG* an independent publication, and run for the purposes of providing content for gamers? (Who owns *NAG*?)
17. What is the importance of *NAG* in the local gaming scene?

Questions for Indie Developers:

1. What games have you produced, and for what platforms?
2. Are you developing games for profit, or for personal reasons (a passion for videogames)?
3. Where did your passion for game design come from?
4. Did you alter the structure of any existing games (modding) when you started out designing games?
5. Why do you feel the need to make your games?
6. Are you dissatisfied with the current videogames industry?
7. What is your vision for videogames?
8. Do you find as an indie developer that you are more able to express your own individuality through games?
9. Do you feel as if you are part of a gaming subculture, including other gamers?
10. What type of gamer are you?

9. Appendix C – Images From rAge

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