

# DIGITAL SYMBOLIC ARENAS

*Reinventing youth identity and  
emerging forms of play*



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# ABSTRACT

This thesis will ethnographically analyze the interrelationships between gender, class, and subcultural styles using different video gaming groups primarily located in Bergen, Norway. I will discuss the structures of the groups and the video-game organizations that they participate in so as to examine how the games fit in with the players' wider social and cultural life. The digital gaming scene provides a new arena for the articulation and reinvention of youth identity in its various contemporary forms. Alongside the game itself other things are being played out, such as cultural-social experimentations in social relations, forms of communication, and symbolic iconography. I unpack the interplay between users and technology by studying how game design works through its ability to organize aesthetics, narratives, and reward structures within virtual worlds. The genre preferences and gaming habits of different individuals are analyzed so as to examine the varying degrees of devotion to a game and indeed sometimes addiction to it. The increased accessibility of digital games has transformed the sociocultural context surrounding gaming activities making it part of new forms of mass consumption. New marketing strategies and ways of generating revenue are emerging, most prominently often employing chance-based game rewards that sometimes obscure the line between gaming and gambling. Due to increased consumer possession of technological devices, such as personal computers, gaming systems, and smartphones, the gaming market has become highly lucrative, for advertisers, those selling goods and for game developers. The latter rely increasingly not on large single initial purchases but a continual stream of seemingly small insignificant purchases that often promise participation in the chance to win something big and in doing so further blurring the lines between gaming and gambling.

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# Preface

This ethnographic study is based on eight months of fieldwork primarily in Bergen, Norway between January and July 2017. The data was collected at various field sites including: a youth organization, a video game workplace, various online gaming communities, and a few other locations used for meeting interviewees. I will make use of pseudonyms for all participants and avoid using any identifiable personal details about them. The ethnographic research comprises a selection of unstructured interviews, field notes from observation, transcribed notes from recorded interviews, and computer chat logs and notes from online play sessions. Using the qualitative research method of participant observation, my data was gathered not only by observing but also by actively engaging in gaming activities. This meant not just online activities but also offline gaming activities that included how game participants socialized both before and after games where they planned and discussed game strategies and team approaches. I also interviewed game developers and promoters about the logic underpinning the sale and design of modern games.

The earliest challenge I faced was finding a local gaming community willing to accept an outsider wanting to study them. Initially, I struggled to locate any public gaming gathering in Bergen. Fortunately, a fellow student offered me contact information for one of his friends who founded and ran a youth gaming venue. Its aim was to provide a social arena for the young gamers to meet “face-to-face”. A few weeks later I was equally fortunate to be hired in a part-time position as a support representative for a Norwegian game developer company. Participating in these two networks of gaming enthusiasts led to a snowball effect which provided me with opportunities to gather ethnographic data from both a consumer and developer standpoint. I have since been able to revisit some of my interlocutors at different times after the end of my fieldwork as I have been staying in Bergen while working on the thesis.

Two of my interlocutors invited me to become a member of their online gaming group. I found these online communities to be a great additional source of ethnographic material.

These online gatherings involved several individuals speaking into microphones on the computer, similar to conference calls, where they discussed not just games but also their relationships to each other, opponents, and the virtual world. This was done through a computer software called Discord, which allows users to create or join groups to chat with members who are online either by typing in text chat or speaking in voice chat. The notification sound of a new message appearing in the group chat often meant a request from a member asking if anyone would join them in playing a game. This allowed me to accompany some of my Bergen interlocutors into the online game worlds outside of work hours and the youth club gatherings where I could explore what kind of sociality and culture they were developing in this virtual space between other spaces.

My interest in gaming activities in a Norwegian context originates from a desire to understand what the games mean for different individuals – how the games fit in with their other activities, interests, obligations, relationships, and forms of identification. Without intimate detailed knowledge of a game, it is difficult to grasp the significance of events that occurs within it. Likewise, I believe to better understand the underlying issues which gaming activities entail, e.g. issues of identity, gender, masculinity, social isolation, addiction, etc. it is necessary to understand the concept of the game and how the player experience the relationships and meanings it unfolds. The purpose of this ethnographic study will be to shed light on these issues by using ethnographic data from various gaming groups.

The thesis consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 introduces youth subcultural styles using Dick Hebdige's (1979) model and discusses how this can also be applied to the contemporary digital gaming scene. Different game subcultures have emerged to symbolically separate themselves from the dominant mainstream society and also other game subcultures. Using ethnographic material from my visits to a youth organization, I argue that different forms of play in various games and genres fit in with the player's wider life in different ways, e.g. competitive forms of individualism, team rivalries, social solidarity, competing obligations, etc. The most apparent division was the PC gamers and TV console gamers, but even within each category further subcategories existed. Participants used slang words and vernacular often borrowing from English which were used sometimes to congratulate each other, but at other times used to censure and police behavior but also motives, desires and ways of interacting. I argue that the lack of female participants in the groups that I studied was not due to a lack of female players, but instead may relate to the particular games being played at the center which differs from the games most played by females. this also relates to the different ways males



and females relate and prioritize competing social and cultural obligations. This leads me to examine masculinity in digital games and here I draw on the works of Clifford Geertz (2005), especially his analysis of “deep play”. In certain games “toxic” behavior in young male players can emerge and needs to be controlled, managed or redirected. It often emerges predominantly in competitive team-based games where power relations are being played out and so this is analyzed.

In Chapter 2, I examine immersive technologies involving role-playing online games, and how this game universe can be used by individuals who wish to escape real life possibilities. Here I draw on recent anthropological work on gambling and gaming which I reinterpret using my own ethnographic material. For example, one of my key informants, Jakob, used games like World of Warcraft to immerse himself in a virtual computer universe that transcended his physical disabilities. It is necessary to analyze the diverse investments that members of gaming communities have and how this underpins the growth of online worlds that allow interplay between players across national borders. Some individuals are continuously engaged in the games for extensive amounts of time, sometimes exceeding twelve hours consecutively and thus any other meaningful activity that they may be involved in.

Chapter 3 offers an analysis of the interrelationship between different game genres and how they appeal to different age groups and gender. The games have changed historically and so have those engaging with them. Mobile gaming has become the dominant force within the contemporary gaming market, which I explore using ethnographic data from the gaming industry. Here I continue discussion on the addictive technologies but instead from game designers’ perspective. I argue that certain randomized reward structures found in modern games are indistinguishable from gambling reward structures that they borrow on certain technologies for producing desire and meaning.

Doing fieldwork at different field sites, which often meant participating in virtual worlds, and gathering data from different perspectives (i.e. consumer and business side) has caused me at different times to rethink how one is to understand contemporary gaming activities and its underlying issues. The intent is in any case that it will be helpful in studying contemporary gaming activities as a whole.



## Chapter I

# Emergent gaming communities as subcultures

In one of the most influential cultural studies books, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Dick Hebdige discusses Britain's post-war youth subculture styles as constructed mainly through music and clothing. He argues that the style of these youth subcultures emerged in response to mainstream culture, sometimes participating in it and other times resisting or transforming it. Subcultures are defined as a group of like-minded individuals who develop shared values, beliefs and a sense of identity that are different from the dominant societal standards or norms. Participants may feel neglected, marginalized or opposed to these prevailing standards, but not necessarily so. For a subculture to exist there should be a division, which sometimes can be a solution or an accommodation to contradictions or conflicts within mainstream society and the dominant culture. Sometimes the subculture is not that radical but involves a distinctive creative reworking and elaboration of possibilities within the dominant culture. Hebdige (1979, 81) discusses how "the mod and teddy boy 'solutions' were produced in response to different conjunctures which positioned them differently in relation to existing cultural formations". For Hebdige the "solution" was a sense of style that allowed different participants to symbolically separate themselves from each other and from the dominant society which some sought to challenge and subvert in a symbolic way. Subcultures create themselves and their relationships through developing and celebrating a separate system of symbols and rituals. These can work to transform powerless or marginalized youths into ambiguous menacing figures, such as punk rockers, skinheads, Rastafarians, and Teddy boys. The dominant culture can sometimes be experienced as having an oppressive hegemonic quality, and so subcultures may deliberately cultivate forms of cultural noise that seeks to

interfere with the reproduction of the mass culture, to disrupt or just annoy it. There is often pleasure in these clamorous dislocating and irritating performances of difference.

I believe Hebdige's model of subcultures offers a way of understanding diverse digital gaming subcultures among contemporary Norwegian youth. Whereas Hebdige focuses on musical preferences, I will explore how the digital gaming scene can provide a new symbolic arena for the articulation and reinvention of contemporary youth identity in diverse ways. A digital subculture can often be an ambiguous and ambivalent mixture of participation, resistance and transformation of the mainstream culture, with video games providing new arenas for cultural-social experimentation. This can include experiments in identity, social relations, forms of communication and symbolic iconography. Apart from the actual game, or more accurately alongside it, other things are being played out, which require studying how players perceive and experience their participation in the game, its relationships and symbolic world. Sometimes the creation of an alternative subculture takes the form of creating new domains of value – these can be alternative currencies and forms of material wealth, but they can involve non-economic forms of value. These can emerge through positing a hierarchy of games that marks out age, competence, skill, gender and other ways of being identified and valued. Loyalty to a game and indeed addiction to it needs to be unpacked in terms of what forms of value the game provides in the social and cultural realm of youth identity, which is never closed in upon itself, even though it can often give that appearance. Instead, to rephrase Hebdige, a video game subculture always exists in relationship to another video game subculture with which it may compete or just borrow from in complex ways that can articulate complex ambiguous relationships to mainstream society. In the following section I will present my ethnographic data on contemporary Norwegian youth and the gaming activities that they participate in so as to symbolically separate themselves from socio-cultural formations in real-life contexts.

## **A volunteer organization for digital gaming activities**

During the planning of my fieldwork, I was advised by a fellow student to seek out a specific institutional site centered on digital games, which focused on organizing social gatherings for youths. I visited a municipality-supported organization that offered after school and weekend access for computer and video game enthusiasts. The site was open to participants of all ages, though it was focused on youths between 13 and 20 of age – who could now meet and play

with (or against) other enthusiasts in a dedicated locale for digital games instead of playing at home by themselves. I contacted Christian who was the founder and manager of the youth gaming club, herein called YGC. After I presented my proposed project to him, I was invited to attend their next social gathering.

## **The youth gaming club**

When I first arrived at the YGC I was given a tour of the locale which was divided into two main rooms, each approximately the size of a primary school classroom. The people there were already engaged and immersed in some form of play already. It felt similar to entering an arcade venue, though in this particular arena every game could be played free of charge. Every player I had the opportunity to converse with (mostly during breaks between games) was exceptionally welcoming and inclusionary. Participants were not required to bring any equipment themselves, since all necessary electronic devices were supplied. The organization was directed at the kids of parents with limited income who were working class or perhaps welfare recipients. In providing a social space, the club sought to break their perceived social isolation and potential alienation.

Opening hours could vary slightly adjusting to general interest, participant count, and budget. The gatherings were typically held from 5 to 10 p.m. on Mondays through to Fridays, and from noon until 6 p.m. on Saturdays. Club meetings varied in sizes depending on whether it was held on a weekday or on the weekend and if there was a bigger event planned. In addition to operating as a social arena for casual players, competitive play was prevalent and was especially promoted as separate events during the weekends. This was the most popular time, and even more so during tournaments. Mostly there would be as few as four to six participants, but on other occasions (such as during tournaments) there would be over twenty attendees. In one room, there was a small sofa area with provisions such as biscuits and fruit-flavored beverages, however it was mostly unoccupied as people preferred to spend their time playing as their form of social interaction. Attendees typically visited between two and five days a week and played between two and four hours during each visit, often more during weekends. During its busiest time, the sofa area was used by a few spectators or players who were waiting their turn to play. Spectators were few in numbers and were mostly newcomers curious about the YGC who would eventually join and play if some free terminals were available. In total, there were eight computers and two televisions connected to gaming consoles. Christian introduced

me to some of the frequent visitors and I was invited to participate both in games I was familiar with and in games I had never heard of before. This allowed me to become a part of a team. Teaching me new games was a way of socializing me into the group, it reversed inequalities of me being older and working. It made me inept and empowered the youth who could now teach me how their virtual worlds mediated and created experiences.

Most participants regarded themselves as “gamers”. There was a certain inclusivity and pride involved in being identified and referred to as such by themselves and others. The label implied a certain degree of experience, dedication, and skill that also had its own hierarchy of inclusivity and difference. One major division was between a “casual” gamer or a “hardcore”. Other popular slang phrases, acronyms, and abbreviations were often used to express emotions or opinions. Some phrases seemed more esoteric than others and depended on in-house knowledge of the topic discussed or a particular game, something that I will analyze more fully later on. However, they were also shared general expressions which all participants understood regardless of their game preference. One was the division of “the PC gamers” versus “the console gamers”. The first played on personal computers (mid-range Windows desktop computers) and the second played on video game consoles connected to a television (primarily Nintendo GameCube and PlayStation 4).

The two main rooms in the YGC were separated into these categories. The PC gamers were interested in specific genres whose playing styles were different to what the console gamers preferred. Though some games could be played on different types of devices, others such as some fighting games were only played on consoles, while many strategy and shooter games were only played on PCs. Comparing both rooms, I observed noticeable differences between PC and console gamers regarding socialization, team play, competitiveness, age, and on a few occasions gender and cultural-ethnic divisions. Though not immediately obvious the separation of game styles underpinned prominent sub-identities, for example, shooter game enthusiasts tended to identify as hardcore PC gamers and often expressed their opinion of the PC as the superior electronic device with the implication that it also required and created superior skills in judgment, timing, strategies. Console players usually rejected such remarks and considered them as teasing forms of rivalry and provocation that were to be dismissed as jokes or good nature humor. Though mostly considered as banter by console player, the voiced remarks of PC gamers were often part of strong group and individual a sense of superiority. This was reproduced by labeling console gamers who played shooter games as “plebs” – a slag Latin word referring to the lower class with connotations of their social, cultural and intellectual

inferiority. Such teasing remarks never seemed to escalate into conflicts between the two groups, as they appeared to be regarded as playful banter that were more about maintaining group boundaries and identity.

A few gamers alternated between the rooms, though they often preferred a specific device associated with a particular game style and its forms of identity. PC gaming can be analyzed as a subculture style in the gaming community e which exists often in a relationship of rivalry to console gaming. My intention is to clarify and differentiate the characteristics of the two gaming communities so as to recognize what makes a gaming arena more appealing to some players in contrast to others. Within each category, there are also further subcategories: PC gamers have different games that they use to rate and differentiate themselves from each other and the same applies to console gamers. Though partly autonomous worlds, these virtual worlds nevertheless fit into a player's wider life even if this is sometimes not immediately obvious, for example, competitive forms of individualism, team rivalries, social solidarity and corporate belonging.

## **PC gamers**

While maintaining the anonymity of individuals at the YGC, I will describe the PC gamers and analyze how they reproduced and transformed their identity and relationships through differences in play style. The PC gamers were middle schoolers aged from twelve to sixteen. They were exclusively males except for a few females who infrequently attended. Most went to public education rather than private schools. They were ethnically Norwegian and from Bergen. Every so often a handful of students of African descent would visit to play the soccer game FIFA on the PlayStation 4. There was little interaction between them and the more frequent visitors. This might say something about informal ethnic divisions among youth and how these are remediated rather than overcome by video games, for most interaction between players happened through playing with or against each other.

PC gamers preferred team based competitive play rather than individualistic solitary game playing. The two games that were played most of the time were called Counter-Strike: Global Offensive and League of Legends. Both of which are available exclusively for PCs. Their genres are defined as being multiplayer first-person shooter, and multiplayer online battle arena respectively. Despite belonging to quite different genres, these games shared two aspects of play styles: team play and competitive play. They were also military like games and

participating in them involved a dependency on other teammates and accepting the hierarchy or leadership of the team, and the strategies and roles allocated. Each team discovered its collective identity by playing against other real teams over the internet whose members may have never met in other contexts. In contrast, the console players often involved competitive play against other individuals in the same physical room and they did not have teammates, or leadership hierarchy. Console games invoked a more individualistic competitive activity versus the team competition of the PC games whose. PC games required strategies organized through clear concise forms of communication, cooperation and leadership between players.

There were different forms of communications depending on the game. In League of Legends, communication was mostly text based and players used signals to provide visual cues to other players about crucial information, e.g. placing a question mark in a specific location on the map to signal a missing enemy player who was previously in sight to alert other team players to be on guard. In other games, wearing a headset with a microphone attached was required as voice chatting was considered the most efficient method of communication for organizing strategies of attack and defense. PC gamers who played the shooter game Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (hereinafter CS:GO) utilized microphones at all times, even when sitting next to one another so as to be able to hear both the game sounds as well as their teammates. This game involved fast-paced gameplay, and so players rarely had time to type out a message while simultaneously using the keyboard to play. Voice communication involved some restrictions however: only teammates could speak with one another, and thus typing was necessary to converse with the opposing team. The text chat was mostly occupied by “dead” players i.e. someone killed in the game and so became a spectator until the next round.

If there were not enough players from the YGC to make up a full team, local players would team up with other more distanced players through the internet. These unseen players were rarely Norwegian (and often were Polish, Swedish, Russian, German, or British), and moreover teammates who could converse in English. This also gives a sense of the class status of Counter-Strike players indicating they come from upper working class and middle-class backgrounds who could afford the tuition and schools that taught English. YGC gamers displayed varying degrees of English skills, oral and written. Participants from ages sixteen and above were fairly proficient and engaged in general English conversations with online players. Communication mostly involved short game related phrases, although some casual conversation sporadically emerged. Teammates of different nations regularly asked one another which country they were from, sometimes imitating accents or saying words or phrases



in the other player's language. Playing certain games, including CS:GO, required users to log in to their Steam account, a popular digital game distribution platform. From there a vast selection of games were available and offered separate community hubs for all the games. Players could also request others to accept them to their friend list, to be able to chat or invite them to play.

Since they were not required to display any sensitive or personal information on their user profiles, players tended to use nicknames or aliases. Although many YGC participants knew each other well, their pseudonyms were commonly used instead of legal names when referred or spoken to during play so as to maintain anonymity but also because there was a pleasure in becoming to some extent a different person. The virtual world with its avatars and characters conferred and required different skills, knowledge, competence and motivations. The pleasure for many young boys becoming young men was to enter these more empowered personae, with their faster, more agile and powerful bodies. There was a pleasure in suspending your everyday character - and the power relations e.g. parents, teachers, work supervisor - that hemmed it in, so as to immerse yourself in another character. The use of nicknames or aliases facilitated this transformation of identity, a point noted by Goffman in his analysis of how new inmates to total institutions are initiated through being given playful names like "fish" or "swab" (Goffman 1961, 18). Within specific gaming subcultures newcomers were often given nicknames as part of a similar rite of passage, such as "noob", "newb", or "newbie" often used pejoratively to symbolically separate recruits from experienced players. By acquiring adequate game knowledge and skill recruits transitioned from a lower newbie status and assumed a new identity as team member. Until then they remained as newbies and referred to as such in a tongue-in-cheek fashion.

Teasing in this manner is used as a form of social control, which allows you to say things that cannot be said in another way without provoking internal conflict which might harm team co-operation. Humor and banter allow you to criticize within a frame that says it is not serious, it is play and comedy, yet the meaning is made (Douglas 1968). Even new players were expected to avoid "noob-like" performance. In this context they operated as strategies for socializing newcomers into what were seen as more professional, serious forms of play. I never observed criticism towards beginners between YGC participants themselves. They seemed to rely on more distant others to do the forms of socialization and policing that the team required. This perhaps could say something about Norwegian society and its celebration of consensus as an ideological value for mediating social relations.

The YGC did not have an official team with specific members who had specific roles, thus the team arrangement regularly changed. There was usually a spot available for whoever wanted to join at the time, though often the team consisted of the same gamers who frequently played together at the gatherings. The teams were so flexible that the roles of players were variable and often decided along the way, if decided at all. The teams did not often have a designated team leader, instead there was almost always a consensus of which player was the most experienced one, and this player would often call out the strategies at the start of most rounds<sup>1</sup>. A typical match would last a little less than an hour, and players would often play several matches consecutively. The most experienced player would often oversee the allocation of tasks and negotiation of conflicts between team members, even though he was not necessarily a designated leader. On appearance it appeared that any strategy called out by any player was nearly always accepted by the rest of the team. However, it was mostly the most experienced player who first called out the strategies. This might be perhaps because less experienced players did not feel confident enough to have the authority, knowledge, or skill to do so themselves, and so informal knowledge and rules mediated the emergence of social hierarchy through forms of deference and knowledge of what the game required.

A person's skill level was visually and publicly represented in the game's ranking system. Points were rewarded, e.g. by killing enemies, and ranks were adjusted accordingly after the end of a match depending on individual and collective performance. Specific details of the ranking system and how it assesses performance remain unclear since the developers have yet to publicly release this information. Publicly, the rank hierarchy was comprised of eighteen ranks, and generally the more you win, the higher rank you would eventually achieve. The opposite was also true; if you lost matches, you could be given a lower rank. Labels were given to groupings of ranks in the hierarchy and were according to the community's consensus divided into three categories: beginner, intermediate, and advanced ranks (see fig. 1).

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<sup>1</sup> A competitive round in CS:GO lasted around two minutes and a match consisted of a maximum of thirty rounds, i.e. the match would end when a team reached sixteen round wins, or if both teams had fifteen round wins it would end with a tie.

<b>Beginner ranks</b>	<b>Intermediate ranks</b>	<b>Advanced ranks</b>
Silver I	Gold Nova 1	Master Guardian Elite
Silver II	Gold Nova 2	Distinguished Master Guardian
Silver III	Gold Nova 3	Legendary Eagle
Silver IV	Gold Nova Master	Legendary Eagle Master
Silver Elite	Master Guardian I	Supreme Master First Class
Silver Elite Master	Master Guardian II	The Global Elite

Figure 1. Ranks in CS:GO for players participating in competitive matches.

It is worth noting that there were two separate game modes: casual matches and competitive matches. The former mode does not affect rank and players of any skill can play together as a way of practicing with each other and socializing outside a more competitive medium. Anyone can join or leave a casual game without any penalties during such a match. The casual practice mode allowed two teams of equal skill to play against each other without cost or benefit and was widely regarded as the main play mode.

New players who start without any rank must compete in a certain number of casual matches to gain access to the competitive mode of the game. Ten victories in competitive matches is required so the game can assign an appropriate rank. Since progression is not linear, a player's first rank will not necessarily be the lowest, "Silver I". The first rank a player achieves is usually a beginner or intermediate rank. From then on after a certain number of competitive victories or losses, they will either be promoted or demoted one rank at most. The hierarchy ranks provide a form of symbolic status indicator for placing identity within a sense of the actor's commitment, skill, powers of judgement etc. that can be a source of pride and awe or just embarrassing shame to deflected or dismissed. There was always much excitement within the group whenever a higher-ranking player joined a team. Conversely, "Silver" was often used to tease, insult, or provoke players into better performance, more practice, etc. Once during a competitive match (five-versus-five players) one enemy remained while YGC participants had him outnumbered four players against one. When this opponent unexpectedly managed to defeat all four players single-handedly, the fifth YGC player scolded his team to get their act together and "stop playing like a bunch of Silvers". The phrase "Silver tactic" is also frequently used to point out a botched attempt or a thoughtless maneuver, implying only lower-ranking players could choose or do something so absurd. The "Master Guardian II" rank is regarded as somewhat admirable, although "Legendary Eagle" and above are considered to

be true prestige. Making determined efforts to improve their personal skill, players often invest between one thousand to three thousand hours to reach these prestige ranks. This itself gives developers lots of potential online time for marketing that can be unrelated to the game.

The hierarchy of ranks was essential for the community, came immediately into play in my role as a participant-observer. During my initial meeting at the YGC, players of CS and GO immediately asked my rank after I mentioned that I had experience with the game. Later, I found this to be the first inquiry for any newcomers. I had played roughly two years intermittently prior to my fieldwork and at the time I was balancing between the intermediate and advanced ranks. The average rank at the youth club was Gold Nova Master. I did not want to assume a leading role but instead to participate in a non-obtrusive position. Coincidentally I was offered to play on a shared game account owned by the YGC (they owned multiple accounts to share with participants who did not privately own the game themselves) and I decided to participate using this account instead of my own. The account was ranked Gold Nova 3 which made it possible for me to participate as a lower ranked player. Consequently, I was not expected to lead and could instead participate and observe from a beginner perspective. I chose this alternative since I wanted to do as close to a fly-on-the-wall type of observation as possible and assuming a leading role would result in the opposite.

Lower-ranking players were never expected to have as much game knowledge or responsibilities as the higher-ranking ones. The responsibilities were mainly to lead and instruct others in the mechanics, plots, tactics, and strategies of the game that required co-operation. This, along with tips and tricks were discussed after the matches. This included flanking maneuvers, such as drawing the enemies' attention while sending a player around them for an ambush. For instance, one player could be told to throw a "flashbang" (a non-lethal grenade temporarily producing a flashing light to disorient the enemy) into the entrance of a building, while the others prepare to move inside after the concussive blast. Balancing equipment for the teammates was also a priority, e.g. only one person at most should use a bolt-action sniper rifle such as the "AWP" shooting from a distance, and the others should use fully automatic assault rifles such as the "AK-47" or "M4A4". At times when a less-experienced player acquired an AWP, perhaps from looting a dead enemy, the leader would command them to swap weapons with the person most skilled with the weapon. Sometimes beginners challenged these commands because they wanted to try out the weapon themselves, which was never an issue. Team members displayed friendly attitudes in general and listened to one another. The players at the YGC demonstrated competitive yet non-aggressive engagement during play to a greater

extent compared to online players. Only once did I observe a raging frustration amongst the team, when they experienced a devastating loss and a player expressed anger over the lack of team co-operation. He assumed the role of decision maker although none seemed to comply with any orders, he scolded them: “Stop acting like a bunch of *noobs* and start working as a team”. None of the team members responded to the criticism and the remaining part of the match was played in silence. Following the loss, it seemed morale was low, and they quit playing for the day. Apart from this incident, there was generally a shared spirit of good-fellowship regardless of victory or failure. The PC players cultivated a feeling of good-natured camaraderie. In contrast, the console area was mostly preoccupied by individuals competing aggressively against one another.

## **Console gamers**

In contrast to the PC players, the typical age for the console group ranged from middle schoolers to young adults. They were mostly males except for two or three females who came occasionally and were aged twelve to sixteen. Most days this was a pure male space. Console gamers were mostly of Norwegian ethnicity with a few young participants whose parents were of non-Norwegian ethnicity, some African and Asian. All participants grew up and lived in different parts of Bergen. They went to standard public schools, middle school and high school. A few older board members still participated in the activities, and they were mostly studying subjects such as business administration or information technology at the University. Relaxed clothing was a common denominator for console players such as sweatpants and hoodies. Conversely, PC gamers’ clothing style were mostly the same as contemporary casual styles in the dominant Norwegian culture. It involved everyday clothing, such as jeans and a plain shirt or t-shirt. There were a few exceptions such as brightly colored hair. Having visited a number of different gaming communities throughout my fieldwork I observed other gamers whose hair was colored green, pink, or purple. This was not uncommon and largely accepted by the gaming communities. Using Hebdige’s model this could be seen as a form of symbolic resistance towards the Norwegian dominant culture. From personal experience growing up in a large Norwegian city I can with some certainty state that contemporary dominant Norwegian culture does not favor expressing oneself with clothing and/or hair styles that is strikingly different from that of the majority. At the YGC however, this was an accepted form of marking out individual identity and the alterity of a gamer who lived in other worlds apart from the norm.

Differences between PC and console gamers were not only evident regarding clothing and hairstyles, but even more so regarding play style and genres. This is perhaps related to the individualism of the popular console game genres, which celebrate individual skill and competence over co-operation. The avatar identity also allows experiments in identity. The hoods also imply concealing one identity, cloaking it to create another. Clothing is not neutral but signifies belonging, the hoods and track pants also symbolized lowliness, marginality, or liminality as Victor Turner describes it: states of being in-between, like youth - no longer a child and not yet an adult. It is also as Turner recognized the re-valuation of that lowliness.

Console gamers played fighting games, one participant against another, Super Smash Bros was without doubt the most popular game in the console room, and quite often the only game played there. I was not familiar with the game or even the genre as a whole, though I learned the playing style for these games revolved around personal skill more than anything else. Super Smash Bros was developed by the Japanese video game company Nintendo and featured characters from a wide range of their many other products. A unique aspect of this game that made it stand out from other traditional fighting games was the gameplay objective: instead of defeating opponents by killing them or beating them unconscious, the aim was to knock them off the stage. Combined with the exaggerated, “cartoonish” art style, one could assume the target audience to be young. Yet I have met several adults in their twenties who are fans of the game. Participants of all age groups played against each other with experience or game skills having no apparent correlation regarding age. This was no doubt part of its popularity that it playfully subverted hierarchies of age and professionalism. I found it more difficult to interact with console gamers due to a general lack of conversation between the participants. At the end of each match we would shake hands often saying “gg” (pronounced in English, twice the letter “G”) which meant “good game” before switching seats with others. Not only were the game conversations short but the play style and socializing aspects in the console room were more individualistic and isolating compared to PC gamers who spoke more between and during games. Console gamers mostly played in silence apart from occasional banter, e.g. “Is there something wrong with your controller?” a player asked sarcastically after defeating an opponent in Super Smash Bros. He knew it was not defective and the opponent was just performing poorly. The opponent responded “Shut up. I want a rematch.” and they continued to play intensively yet mostly in silence.

As opposed to competitive play, few players in general engaged in games focusing on casual play. When I asked Christian about youth playing casually, he explained that casual

games are most often designed as single player games. Few gamers visited the YGC to play by themselves and most likely single player gamers would play at home, according to Christian. This is evidence of the way the home has become a space of entertainment for arcade video style games often found in public commercial spaces. The privatization of entertainment allows individuals to stay home with the home often nowadays being seen to be too comfortable to leave. The increasing development and expansion of online gaming due to faster and more powerful home computers and internet connections makes the ability to play with others from home practical. In addition, there is also the interest of many parents in keeping the kids at home i.e. due to the perceived dangerous nature of arcade parlors. With their kids staying at home, parents can then observe and regulate the gaming activities. It allows more detailed policing and supervision of leisure by parents who can point out the need to balance video game playing with work, domestic and school commitments. There is also a desire to make leisure productive of something, even if it is character, motivation, discipline, reflexes, alertness, team co-operation. A number of thinkers have pointed to how the neo-liberal economy makes the personal and leisure productive (Read 2009). By attempting to understand some of the intricacies of video games – including the possibility of them operating as social and sports arenas – parents seek to develop healthy relationships by their children within competitive arenas. One difficulty is the extensive gaming vernacular which is constantly growing and changing. The variety of slang, jargon, and esoteric abbreviations might discourage some parents from engaging in gaming discussions, but it also might be what draws their children to the gaming culture. All specialized languages and dialects are used to keep some people out while creating in-group solidarity for those within. The creation of such borders is part of exclusion being necessary to have identity.

Many players at the youth club used very specific words and phrases which belonged to a particular game. However, there were other more generalized set of words and phrases understood and used by all players. Slang words and phrases were always spoken in English, even among Norwegian players who in using English participated in an international vocabulary or language, whose alternative cultural reality mirror alternative virtual world of the game.

## Language and code of conduct

The most frequently used slang words and phrases were used to express or describe various emotions or situations – some even served as a policing of emotions so as to prevent potential conflicts. At first, it was quite a challenge for me to follow the conversations in the console area. However, some slang words, such as *toxic* and *salty* were commonly used by all gamers, to describe (or more often as an attempt to calm down) agitated, upset, or bitter players. Such emotions threaten to interfere with the concentration of other players and so needed to be controlled by making the disappointed player more self-reflexive and self-disciplined. When I asked if anyone was familiar with the origin of these word (I had assumed it might be related to the “salty dog” reference applied to old, cranky sailors) but no one seemed to have a definite answer. One PC player told me it described how defeated players might begin to cry and you could taste the saltiness of their tears. Though both words were used frequently appeared by both groups there was a higher prevalence amongst PC gamers.

Being toxic was similar to being *salty* but with one difference, the frustration now led the disappointed player to attack or accuse other team members of performing badly, or he might yell and curse an opponent. This is what it means to become toxic. Being *salty* was more of a reaction of being frustrated by a player’s own performance, while spreading toxicity involved anger at other players, be it team members or opponents. such a player was poisoning the team culture but also the culture of the game. Being toxic is not just an esoteric gaming word, for it is also used in other contexts (especially by native English speakers). Nevertheless, I believe it assumes particular accentuated connotations in gaming slang in this context since Norwegians usually do not use this English word in other contexts. In particular it was frequently used in discussions about competitive gameplay. Codes of conduct were promoted by Christian, the manager, who told me that they sought to promote wholesome competitive ways of playing as opposed to the toxic environments that one could easily stumble across or into when playing with strangers online. These words were not only used as ways to articulate rage and anger, but also as ways of policing emotions and behavior. Gaming activities can be seen as pedagogic, getting youth to police themselves to create forms of self-discipline and self-reflection where their own subculture of collective policing must produce self-policing. The youths were in effect teaching themselves practices of self-control that were also presented as necessary for later life, for managing themselves and relationships in the workplace, family, and other forms of social life. This is perhaps one reason why a government council in Norway



set up this gaming venue directed at youth leisure, directed at render that leisure time productive of a subject and their subjectivity

Participants engaged in team based competitive play that involved communicating often and loudly during play, rarely being toxic, which was discouraged by others on the few occasions it did happen. It could at times be difficult to differentiate between banter and mild toxicity. Yet extremities were not uncommon to observe during play. A recurring example of how online strangers would clearly be considered toxic was by the frequent use of the abbreviation “kys”, short for “kill yourself”. I never observed a YGC member say or write this, and when they received such insults from other players online, they would brush it off as irrational outbursts by “sore losers”. Concerned about the extent of online bullying among teenagers I asked older YGC participants and staff about the issue. Arnstein, an adult player, explained to me that even though some game developers introduce systems like profanity filters, ways to report offensive players, etc. to prevent unwanted behavior, players will always find a way to offend, antagonize or even harass others:

Kids have always found new ways to bully each other, but the anonymity we can hide behind online makes it much easier to express yourself, be it positively or negatively, without any apparent consequences.

Even though it could seem like most people online (especially in gaming communities) were ill-behaved, he assured me that it was the loud minority who made it seem so. No one at the YGC would ever be toxic towards one another, though good-natured bantering with online opponents was not uncommon i.e. PC gamers might type “2ez” meaning “[you are making this] too easy” while gaining the upper hand. However, later they might also type “gj”, short for “good job”, if the opponents took the lead. Such etiquette and protocols of play were an essential part of the YGC and one of the main reasons it hosted gatherings for youths: to create a safe space for young vulnerable game enthusiasts to play freely and to mitigate the potential damages of online bullying. I sometimes observed during team based competitive matches a *salty* online stranger being excessively toxic towards a YGC player, the response of the surrounding YGC team members was to complement the victim on their performance and urge them to ignore the toxic player. What is being taught here is how to hand highly competitive situations that involve intimidation and how not to be overwhelmed by strategies designed to

affect one's emotional balance, concentration, skill and competence. What is also being taught is how to create caring communities that sustain all of the latter.

The PC gamers playing shooting games went further and even complimented their opponents every so often writing “ns”, short for “nice shot!” after being shot to death when their execution was due to an extraordinarily skilled action. This complement was often responded to with “ty”, or “thank you”. Newcomers were often taught these abbreviations early on and served to mitigate and prevent any ill-mannered aggravations by establishing rapport between the opposing sides. The level of competitive combativeness among PC gamers did not spill over into toxic bullying and it might be one reason many chose this game genre. The etiquette and protocols of play involved less coercive power relations which are sometimes built on emotional bullying tactics that deliberately try to disrupt concentration and skill.

When Christian explained the distinction between “casual” and “hardcore” gamers, he noted how casual players with less experience often saw see the game “superficially”, as using weapons and violence to kill an enemy so as to feel superior. When defeated, such players may feel humiliated, and may be inclined to become *salty* and curse their opponent. Experienced hardcore gamers see this as immaturity and as not understanding that the game is a competitive activity which is more about mechanics, methods, strategies and ongoing practice. One of the older PC gamers who considered himself a hardcore gamer explained to me his thought process when defeated:

If I lose it means my opponent did something better than me. It is a good opportunity for me to figure out what I could have done better to further develop my skills. I can get *salty* when something goes wrong, or I can choose to acknowledge that there is room for improvement and try to analyze which areas to improve. Getting angry during a game only affects your performance negatively, so it is only a waste of energy. When you become familiar with different techniques and know how difficult they can be, it is easier to appreciate when someone else executes them perfectly, even when they are playing against you.

The strategy was to try to depersonalize and provide some role distance between the player and their performing self (Goffman 1959). This was seen as a way of protecting the self from bullying intimidation from opponents but also from destructive forms of self-criticism and anger that may harm concentration and performance. I realized that these caring practices and strategies were an essential value for the youth club that it taught others to perform, and I

observed many younger players sharing these sentiments and practices as well. The control of emotions, rationalizing defeat, and complimenting one another were especially directed at a newcomer who had joined the team to make the activity more inviting and appealing and not scare them away. This especially applied if the newcomer was a female. Since the amounts of females were few, players seemed to make a collaborative effort so as to entice a return to their next gatherings. Female players were seen as more susceptible to becoming alienate from toxic bullying practices and to some extent such practices were encoded as masculine bravado, as testing the masculinity of a player to deliver or to cop an emotional blow. The delivery of such blows was frowned upon in the club which set itself up to teach how to respond and handle such blows.

## **Gender disparity**

Like all gaming communities I visited during my fieldwork, few females attended the YGC gatherings; most of the time there were none. The question is raised of why so many digital games mostly attract young males. It is perhaps partly because these games are largely designed for young male gamers. This in turn leads to the further question of which specific aspects of such games attract males and serves to alienate females, and if this is consciously produced by deliberate design or is an unintended effect. Increasingly, some developers and corporations have become conscious of the issue and have been trying to develop female-oriented games so as to expand their market. Surveys suggest nearly half of all gamers internationally are females, including in Norway<sup>2</sup>. If this is so, then the gender disparity at gaming gatherings cannot be explained by a lack of female gamers but by their reluctance to attend those gatherings or to participate in the games hosted in those gatherings. According to a 2017 report by the video game analytics company Quantic Foundry, the most popular game among females is Match 3 (a type of puzzle game). Other popular games involve family/farm simulation with 69% female players in both categories. The male dominant genres involving sports, first person shooters, and fighting games had 2%, 7%, and 13% female players respectively<sup>3</sup>.

As previously mentioned, the most popular genres at the YGC were fighting and shooting games. Puzzle and simulation games are designed to be single player games and so

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<sup>2</sup>[https://www.isfe.eu/sites/isfe.eu/files/attachments/euro\\_summary\\_-\\_isfe\\_consumer\\_study.pdf](https://www.isfe.eu/sites/isfe.eu/files/attachments/euro_summary_-_isfe_consumer_study.pdf)

<sup>3</sup><https://quanticfoundry.com/2017/01/19/female-gamers-by-genre/>

the incentive to attend a social gathering to play them is less compared to multi-player games. For many females, the advantage of puzzle and simulation games is that they can be paused and resumed at will, and so they can be made to existing social, work, study and leisure time period. Given how the home has become a space of entertainment, so gamers of individualistic genres have less need to attend social gaming gatherings

One of the few female players I talked to at the YGC, Emma, was not a very active participant in any of the popular games. She considered herself a casual gamer and attended the gatherings mostly due to her male friends being there, who were conversely very active players. Her male friends at the YGC played shooter games almost exclusively and if the team had an available position, she would join them, and if not, she often chose to be a spectator and provide some moral support. She seemed accepted as part of the team, even though she was not as experienced as her friends. She was positioned amidst the beginner ranks in CS:GO at the time, a few ranks below the YGC average. Although I there was trend by PC gamers to invite and encourage participation by players of higher rankings, this was not (at least an expressed) concern when inviting Emma. Though the PC gamers claimed to consider her as “one of the guys”, this was a token of symbolic egalitarianism. One evening when no females were present, I asked the boys what their thoughts were on female gamers. There seemed to be a general consensus that playing games were mostly an activity for males, although they did appreciate it whenever females would participate. A console player told me: “I rarely encounter any females when gaming, and when I do, they’re usually there to accompany their boyfriend. I don’t think I have ever met a girl who attended a gathering alone or brought along their female friends.” A few female players occasionally appeared during online games on PC, and one of the older PC gamers in his twenties noted his observations:

Whenever a female uses the voice chat during a match, they get instantly questioned about their gender. Often a girl will be mistaken for a young boy because of their voice or the other way around. It’s not uncommon for people to ridicule young gamers because of their age, saying things like “your voice is so high-pitched, what are you, eight?” So, whenever a girl or a young boy tries to communicate using their voice instead of text, they’re always exposed as an easy target for bullying. If it turns out it’s actually a girl gamer and not a boy, some people will behave really sexist, harass them, or even try to flirt with them. Of course, there are exceptions where they are treated positively, though it seems to be such a rare event that it has to be pointed out every

time a girl joins the game. I can imagine it must be much more difficult for a girl to join in and just play without the fact that she's a girl being brought up by someone.

I asked Emma if she had any female friends who considered themselves “gamers”, be it casual or hardcore, but she did not. She told me: “A lot of the big, popular games are about guns and cars, and sports. I like to play some of them, but most girls at school are usually not interested in those”. Her female friends’ experiences with video games were mostly through *The Sims*, a life simulation game series, which involved role playing or simulating a person’s day-to-day life. The player controls a character or characters who have needs and desires which must be accounted for, e.g. eating, drinking, leisure, social interactions with computer characters, etc. They can also design and decorate a virtual home and can apply to different jobs. Even though Emma occasionally played shooter games, she was more interested in non-competitive casual games. When talking about the popular games at the youth club with elements of violence and fighting, she described them as involving “typical guy stuff” – a response which brings up questions regarding masculinity and its articulation in games.

## **Masculinity in games**

Although there is a market for female oriented video games, the gender distribution at the YGC seemed only to reinforce the stereotypical gamer group as described by the majority of my informants: consisting almost exclusively of young males. From this one could ask if certain games are tied to certain forms of masculinity. In which case it would be interesting to explore how these cultures of masculinity emerge. Do male players form a context around games in which mostly males can relate to? Do developers design game elements around forms of masculinity? Are these conscious decisions or do they emerge along the way unknowingly?

To analyze masculinity in the context of this Norwegian gaming group, I will refer to Clifford Geertz (2005) who tells us about illegal cockfighting in a Balinese village in the late 1950s. Although the physical fighting revolves around the cocks, it is the men themselves, the owners of the cocks, who are fighting. The Balinese men psychologically identify themselves with their cocks – a deliberate double entendre that exists also within the Balinese language as in English. Geertz describes the cocks as masculine symbols for the Balinese men who engage in violent cockfights: “In the cockfight, man and beast, good and evil, ego and id, the creative power of aroused masculinity and the destructive power of loosened animality fuse in a bloody drama of hatred, cruelty, violence, and death.” (Ibid., 62). Along with violence, an essential

aspect of the cockfight is gambling. Geertz borrows from Bentham “deep play” defined as a game where the stakes are so high that no rational person would engage in it. The duration of the cockfights is short but the amount of money and, more importantly, status involved make the Balinese cockfight deep plays. Collectively considered, the Balinese participants will have brought upon themselves more pain than pleasure. Geertz describe the Balinese cockfighting as a “status bloodbath” (Ibid., 74), although no one’s status really changes. That is, a Balinese man cannot ascend or descend the status ladder by winning or losing cockfights. The cockfights do not kill anyone or reduce anyone to animal status; however, they catch up these themes: death, pride, loss and masculinity and put them into an encompassing symbolic structure. The Balinese emphasize being quiet, still, tranquil and full of self-discipline but in the cockfight, they can explore the opposite of this, the demonic animal side of humanity that they must ordinarily distance themselves from. I will use Geertz’s study of masculinity in cockfighting to explore masculinity in digital games. The war zone has moved into the home, and there is a militarization of everyday life and culture partly implied and articulated by the games.

## **Virtual fighting and violence**

Emma's description of the popular shooting electronic games as “typical guy stuff”, captures the way the roles, behaviors, values, iconography and narrative articulated by the game are more associated with males.

The game play mechanics of CS:GO involve teamwork, communication, and competitiveness which is mediated by the audio-visual narrative structure of the game, which involves quick accurate shooting, violence, and fast-paced action. A participant plays the role of a Terrorist or a Counter-Terrorist during the first half of the game and then reverse these roles at half-time. The Terrorist's objective is to set up an explosive at one of two designated bomb sites and fend off the Counter-Terrorists until the bomb explodes. The Counter-Terrorists’ objective is to find and defuse the bomb before it explodes. Either team can alternatively kill the opposing team to win the round. The gender of the virtual actors is exclusively male. The game’s cinematic trailer advertises this: that a player will take on the role of grown men – fearsome and violent terrorists, or brave specially trained tactical police units. The game elevates depowered high school youths outside of work and offices wielding power into the role of national-global saviors.

Every match I observed or participated in involved at least one death each round, which meant that you would either kill or be killed frequently during a match lasting about one hour. Shooting an opponent in the head was strategically more effective and so “headshots” became more rational, sensible and surgically precise, which served to confer a legitimacy on these symbolic forms of violence. Headshots were always announced by teammates whenever they were lucky (or skilled) enough to hit an opponent in the head. Another valorized violent term was “knifing” an opponent which served to further humiliate the dying victim. Killing an opponent with a knife before they were able to shoot you at a distance was deemed a rewarding challenge. Yet, in more serious matches involving player veterans, they would rather shoot someone, this was seen as more precise, accurate and secure than risking death in an attempt to “knife” an opponent so as to humiliate them. There is a certain normalization of violence in these calculated strategic evaluations of violence that can be seen to participate in what Arendt (2006) called the “banality of evil”, that is its routinization and normalization.

My observations of the banter and toxic behavior involved exclusively male participants. though my sample size of females at the YGC is most female players focused on objective-oriented communication that used positive expressions of approval, encouragement, or support towards teammates. I never observe a female participant attempt to “knife” an opponent, neither did they announce a successful headshot or spread any toxicity in the vocal or written chat. To potentially humiliate or be humiliated was part of the game and also accepted behavior. The act of humiliation was a display of superiority towards the victim. The act of knifing an opponent often meant gambling the odds of successfully overcoming the opponent up close so as to humiliate them, as opposed to shooting them from a distance and with some possible cover which was a safer and reliable way of eliminating them. Being toxic, knifing, and writing teasing remarks all seemed to be ways of overpowering an opponent through the pleasure of power relations that went beyond the act of playing and winning the actual game itself. Provoking a planned psychological reaction from an opponent to distract them from performing well is a well-known sports tactic that is often called sledging. Though this was never a discussed strategy within the groups I observed, it was employed and many of the practices for teaching new players how to play involved teaching them to ignore such provocations. Some male players found it difficult to accept defeat and would act out trigger toxic-like behavior, while females would invariably write “ggwp”, short for “good game, well played” in the text chat at the end of a match.

Game playing has similarities to Geertz analysis of the Balinese cockfighting as a status bloodbath. CS:GO players have the ability to climb up and down the digital - game ranking system in ways that do not affect their actual status in everyday life. These symbolic statuses were important for some players and underpin why they spent so much time playing these games. A few males in the age of 12 to 16 would spend 2 to 6 hours each day playing. This is what Matthew, a frequent 14-year-old CS:GO player at the YGC, had to say about the addictive nature of playing when I asked him about the length of his play sessions :

A match last for 30 to 60 minutes. When I lose, I want to try again because I want to win. When I win, I feel like I am on a streak and want to win more! You always want to play just one more round. If I lose too much, I will lose my current standing in the game and lose my rank, so when I quit playing, I try to make sure that my ranking is at least not worse than when I started.

The game's ranking system worked as a status motivating factor for players. Each player's goal was always to improve their current standing, to be on equal standing with their peers, or even outrank them and perhaps become the *de facto* leader of the group. The highest-ranking player would frequently have the role of strategy and decision maker. All others would defer and listen more closely to this individual's opinions on new game features, mechanics, and strategy. Female players were treated respectfully by their male teammates but would need to defer to male leadership. I was eager to observe a match in which a female would be of highest rank, to examine how gender would affect interaction around status dynamics, but this was never the case. Although some females would be of higher rank than certain males, another male would always be of the highest rank and assume the role of decision maker. When discussing CS:GO as an activity with Matthew and the others, it appeared to be less about fun and games, and more about the satisfaction of overpowering opponents on the path to becoming one of the Global Elite, This is highest rank available and nearly impossible to achieve - the current percentage of players at this rank does not change dramatically and is currently 0.75% as of



January 2018<sup>4</sup>. Like the Balinese cockfight, the competitive play in CS:GO involves a virtual status bloodbath.

Just as CS:GO matches involved violence and fast-paced action so did League of Legends. I was not familiar with this game, but YGC players were happy to answer my inquires during their breaks. Leonard, a high schooler who was a bit older than most CS:GO players, informed me: in League of Legends you pick a role of a “Champion”, and play in one of two teams each consisting of five players. In contrast to CS:GO, one could choose to play as a female character, and many did. I was shown the character selection screen and it seemed there were more male characters than females. Later that evening at home, I counted 78 male and 38 female characters, which is approximately 67% and 32% respectively. this is quite sizeable given there are not 32% female players. The core game itself was available for free, but certain Champions and other features like cosmetics (changing the looks of the Champions) would be locked and could be unlocked by progressing up the game or by purchases. I asked the PC gamers about selecting a Champion to play and their opinions on their gender, but there seemed to be a consensus that gender had little to no direct impact, since the decision was supposedly based on the specific characters mechanics. Each character played differently and had different team roles. In an ideal match each team would discuss which roles and characters to pick to achieve the greatest synergy: if a certain character would be picked, the following selection would need to be carefully considered based on their role and mechanics, i.e. not all roles could be quick and offensive, some might have to play slow but offer strong defensive characteristics.

I spoke with Leonard regarding toxic behavior and how I had been talking to the CS:GO gamers about the topic and he replied: “If you think CS:GO is toxic then you, I guess, you have never played League of Legends” and then laugh. I was invited to observe his next game and was then presented with the game’s text chat with messages from both the opposing team and his teammates (who were anonymous online players). A few messages included supportive information, though most involved direct insults, name-calling and urging others to delete the game since they were deemed incompetent. The toxicity clearly prevalent in League of Legends could be a form of masculinity in the same way as in CS:GO and other games. It could be a way of exploring what Geertz (2005) refers to as the excessive side of masculinity that is

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<sup>4</sup> This statistic is gathered form <https://csgo-stats.com/ranks>, considered a reliable source for player statistics from the CS:GO community. Valve, the developers, do not publish statistics seemingly due to privacy reasons, however, it is possible to scrap data from players regarding demo analysis, match history, general performance, etc. to gather reliable sample data.

normally repressed or controlled in everyday life. It is an immersion into toxic forms of masculinity that involve a school of hard knocks. This form of masculinity would deter many female players for they are less inclined to accept, ignore, or be a part of toxic behavior. Yet ironically the game had many female characters

## Chapter II

# Gaming addiction and escapism

There is much ethnography on play in contemporary digital culture that analyses the diversity of players in terms of region, class, race-ethnicity, gender and age. Bonnie Nardi (2010) examines the social implications of digital technologies in *My life as a night elf priest: An anthropological account of World of Warcraft*. She did three years of participatory observation in the video game World of Warcraft which is often associated with males. She writes about the culture of Warcraft both in the United States but also China where she spent a month studying players in Internet cafes. Nardi explores the history, structure, and culture of Warcraft. She argues for applying activity theory and theories of aesthetic experience to the study of gaming and play. She examines issues of gender, culture, and addiction as part of the play experience. I am interested in documenting and interpreting similar experiences along with how playing games provides the basis for new social relations and paradoxically even an escape from social relations, roles and everyday expectations. For game play can be seen as analogous to what Goffman (1961) describes as absenting from prescribed ways of being: “To engage in a particular activity in the prescribed spirit is to accept being a particular kind of person who dwells in a particular kind of world” (Ibid., 186) Due to the enormous variety of digital games I will focus on online multiplayer games that I am familiar with where interactions between players can be virtual and within the games themselves as well as interactions outside the games. I am interested in obsessive forms of computer addiction, which Nardi also examines, where game playing is at the expense of sleep, homework, studying and leisure time with family. Especially affected is the school performance of boys versus girls. Game playing can also reshape family interactions providing sometimes a new shared basis for them or a way of absenting and moving away from them.

There are cases where individuals immerse themselves in fictional computer worlds to escape or have time off from their real-life responsibilities. These virtual worlds can involve

role-playing using particular kinds of narratives, visual images, plots and themes. The emergence of online role-playing games is an electronic remaking and remediation of fictional worlds through machine worlds. This is something Schull analyses with respect to the rise of electronic forms of gambling at the expense of competitive board gambling games.

Many online computer games give players some choice in how to play the game and the degree to which they interact with other players. They might choose to play collectively or solitarily, competitively or non-competitively. Role-playing games can have a gender basis and be grounded in particular youth cultures and the reinvention of masculinity within those subcultures. This can appear in the gothic imagery of the game that can often be handsome players with an effete aspect. It also seems to be the case that women and especially older women prefer games that do not compete against another person but against a machine reality. This is Natasha Schull's argument in her analysis of the different gambling games played by men and women where she argues that Goffman's analysis of gambling was more applicable to the competitive older table games of the casino and less applicable to the modern solitary video pokers games sought by older women who are often married and working. Young girls' participation in computer games seems to be different though it also diverges from boy's games. Females make up the majority of casual gamers, and spend on average 9.1 hours per week whereas males spend 6.1 hours per week playing casual games (Winn and Heeter 2009, 2). Casual games normally allow players to stop at any stage and resume later, which provides flexibility with the allocation of time. And so female gamers incorporate less time intensive games in their time schedule with other activities, e.g. homework and school studies, participation in family life and domestic responsibilities. Conversely, game playing at the expense of such activities often appears to correlate with obsessive gaming habits. It may not always be apparent when habits transition into addiction. In order to approach an interpretation of computer addiction in any meaningful way, it is necessary to consider what happens inside the virtual reality they participate in as experienced by the player, as well as the offline world. I will now turn to my own ethnographic data to examine how individuals utilize computer worlds in different ways, e.g. crafting new identities, escaping real-life responsibilities, establishing a sense of belonging, etc.

## Escaping into fantasy

A few weeks into my fieldwork, I met a particular participant in his early twenties, Jakob. He was from the area and lived nearby, though this was his first visit in several months. Primarily he preferred casual style games in which he could play against the computer by himself or cooperatively with others. The popular games at the YGC were of competitive nature which had no appeal to him. Staying home meant he would still be able to play with other friends online in the games he preferred. Though, throughout the next months he did occasionally show up during gatherings. When I met him, he was playing a game of Civilization V. It was a strategy game with global narratives of conquest and the rise and fall of nations, which required careful planning of every move. In contrast with the fast-paced action surrounding him, Jakob did not seem as intensely absorbed in the game. With everyone preoccupied with their own activities, my conversation with Jacob resulted with an invitation to join the online community he was part of. He referred to it as a “casual community” and facetiously added that they were not “tryhards”, used to describe an individual who puts what is considered excessive efforts into succeeding yet they repeatedly fail. Some members were more active than others, but regardless of skill and participation anyone could free to join.

They were organized through Discord, a software platform aimed at gamers allowing users to create public or private groups for audio communication, text chats, sharing images and videos. Members were given different roles with different privileges, e.g. administrator, moderator, member, recruit, etc. Privileges that may be given or removed from certain members include recruiting, removing members, posting in specific chat rooms, etc. Jacob was a regular member, which in this community allowed him to recruit new members. Being a member of this casual gaming group allowed me to do participant observation within the virtual, outside of youth club gatherings

At the time he recently moved from his parents’ home into a shared apartment and was in his second semester at the university studying at the Faculty of Humanities. He had just returned after a “gap year” when he worked full-time as a cashier at a grocery store. The original plan was to join the Norwegian Armed Forces, but he was rejected due to some health issues. Instead he spent a year saving up money while assessing the alternatives for the following year. This meant he started his student life rather comfortably without the need for a part-time job and could spend his leisure time playing games instead. Those he chose did not interfere with his studies, according to him. Jakob had lived in Bergen his entire life and was still in touch with his friends from high school. He felt a need to socialize with other students,

but this social need was mostly met through the computer screen. Although he did enjoy the occasional game of Civilization during the gatherings, Jakob primarily played “MMORPGs” or “massively multiplayer online role-playing games” which he also did at home. He was interested in the crafting and customizing of characters participating in virtual machine worlds populated by other real players.

Most of Jakob’s leisure time was invested in the World of Warcraft universe, a game that has dominated the game market for its genre since its launch in 2004. This game has created a shared computer world with 11 million players worldwide during its prime in 2010 (B. Nardi 2010, 83). In recent years, the active user base has reportedly decreased to 1.7 million after only a decade and a half since its release. (NDTV 2018) Regardless of the declining player count World of Warcraft retain loyal followers and Jakob never lost interest in the game ever since he was introduced to it in 2009. I explained I had some experience with the game myself, having played intermittently from 2009 to 2012, He urges me to join his game community if I ever considered “resubbing” (to re-subscribe refers to returning players renewing the required monthly subscription of roughly 13 Euros). The gaming community has many such shorthand slang expression to mark inclusivity and group belonging, to establish its boundaries with the outside world.

Jakob spent 15 to 25 hours a week inside World of Warcraft, typically a couple of hours a day sometimes exceeding 6 hours during weekends. The exceptions that he could remember were a few sporadic breaks, including a four-week hiatus during a summer vacation in reluctant compliance with his parents. The main incentive for him to play he explained as “to become someone else” or rather extend his own abilities to become an improved or ideal version of himself. In the imagined world, real-life restrictions were not necessarily applicable. He could become a warrior though he could not make the grade to join the military. He went on to explain how he suffered from a medical condition that caused his hands to shake unceasingly, consequently diminishing or even eliminating his chance of becoming a proficient marksman, tailor, or surgeon. Immersing himself in a virtual computer universe meant transcending these physical disabilities though not completely for he would never be able to become the same skilled player as those who practiced the same number of hours. They might be seeking their own forms of escape from gender, race, ethnicity, class or just prescribed ways of being - e.g. a student, dutiful son, a pleasant grocery store attendant. The escape theory of leisure has been rehabilitated somewhat by Natasha Schull’s work with female gamblers, but it can also raise problems when used too glibly and without ethnographic context.

## **Becoming someone else**

In the universe of Warcraft there were two factions at war, the Alliance and the Horde, each consisted of different playable races. The Alliance comprised “humans”, “dwarves”, “night elves”, “gnomes”, “draenei”, and “worgens”, while the Horde comprised “orcs”, “undead”, “tauren”, “trolls”, “blood elves”, and “goblins”. Additionally, a third group of humanoid pandas, the “pandaren,” are divided and may fight for either side. WoW involved many such playable races, where racial differences are reconstituted into gothic narratives of lost empires. When an individual creates their own individual character, they have some choice with regard to race and skin color, gender (male or female, no androgynous), class, hair style and color, and facial-bodily features. As found in other role-playing games, “class” does not directly refer to “social class” but rather profession, such as “priest”, “paladin” (or holy knight), “shaman”, etc. These professions offer various forms of defense and attack and are used to differentiate between the skills and capabilities of different characters and players. Certain classes do entail some behavior restrictions due to their background and social standing depending on where they are and who they meet in the universe. For instance, when forming groups, Jakob was particularly cautious when inviting “rogues” due to their reputation of stealing rewards meant to be equally distributed amongst the group members. These characters are contracted to fight for gold, they are mercenaries who mark within the realm of narrative fictions that privatization of war occurring outside the games. Any chosen new character starts off weak and progressively becomes stronger by completing many quests. The character gains experience points and advances in ranks (called levels) starting at level 1 eventually reaching the maximum level of 110, learning new skills and spells along the way. The virtual universe of Warcraft is quite enormous with new content continually being added, which provides new ways to play the game, such as exploring new dungeons, defeating dragons, helping an old lady cross a bridge, or perhaps safely reside within the city walls to chat with other players.

The youth club did not have World of Warcraft on their computers, and the manager confirmed they were more interested in competitive games consisting of matches where fixed time rounds are played. In World of Warcraft, play sessions may last for unspecified periods of time, such as those Jakob typically played on his computer at home, which limited his interaction with other players to text and more commonly voice chat. Nevertheless, he still described the game as “a social game providing opportunities to develop life-long friendships with people you never would have met otherwise”. A few childhood friends joined him occasionally although strictly from the computers in their respective homes. During our talks

regarding incentives to play he emphasized the immersiveness of the universe and the satisfaction of “playing a role” that was in many ways not reminiscent of how he perceived or presented himself in his everyday life. Playing together in the same room with his real-life friends might disrupt this immersion, and he found interactions purely through the game often more appealing. The game allowed Jakob to create several characters, which he referred to either as his *main* (main character) or one of his *alts* (alternate characters). This was something most players had: one main character and others functioning as their alter virtual egos. Players devoted most of their time and efforts to their main character, which became the most powerful and experienced character and the one they felt closest. Yet other characters also give players the potential to escape or transform some of limitations they may have experienced during play, for instance: when a character’s backpacks are filled and the player has no more space to store their things, they usually send excess items through the game’s instantaneous mailing system to one of their *alts* who’s only purpose is additional storage space. While the main character allowed players to escape their everyday selves and the constraints hemming it in outside of the game, the alts also allowed them to escape the limitations of their main character.

I chose the blood elf race mostly because of aesthetics. Their looks, the architecture, and the cities. I did consider a night elf, but they are part of the glorified Alliance faction often misinterpreted by players as flawless saints. The ethics of the factions are not as clearly defined as people think, they are actually different shades of gray in my opinion. I chose a female because I might as well completely immerse myself as someone I am usually not, since I already am myself in real-life. I appreciate the variety and freedom of choosing who to be, something real-life society offers to a much lesser extent. I became a hunter since I wanted to use a bow and arrow to shoot with precision. My main professions are tailoring and enchanting, to make clothing and armor, and to enchant weapons with magical attributes for me and the friends I have in my guild.

Being part of a *guild* meant participating in an organized community within the game so that players could have others with whom to play with. Guilds consist of varying amounts of members from a few handfuls up to several hundreds (Nardi 2010, 15). There is a considerable variance in style amongst World of Warcraft players regarding how they choose to play, and so guilds sometimes advertise themselves as a specific guild type focusing on one certain style to attract like-minded players: PvE (short for “player versus environment”) guilds participate in activities such as raids that relies on cooperation between players who will fight against



computer-controlled enemies. PvP (short for “player versus player”) guilds participate in battlegrounds and arenas in teams where real-life players are fighting against each other for rewards and rating points. RP (short for “roleplaying”) guilds are for players who are interested in acting out their character while playing and must not break character while interacting with others. There are also “social” type guilds, whose main goal are building a community in which they use as social hubs. Their intent is to disregard the never-ending chase of progression and instead unlock game content at a leisurely pace. These guild types are not necessarily mutually exclusive types and sometimes are a combination of two or more. Jakob’s guild’s description read: “Social PvE guild, very active and currently recruiting. Whisper [private message] any member for inv [invitation].”

While the game world is rather large, players are divided into servers, or *realms*. With a few exceptions, characters on any given realm may not interact with those on other realms. For instance, role-playing activities are not as common and by many are considered “strange” and so role-players tend to play on their own servers dedicated to role-playing. European players are limited to European realms and cannot interact with American players, etc. I already owned an inactive game account from a few years prior to the fieldwork but renewed the monthly subscription after getting invited to Jakob’s group. Though my pre-existing characters were on a different realm than those of Jakob’s, and so I created a new character: a “pandaren monk” since they could change into any of the available roles during play i.e. defensive, offensive, or supportive. This way I could fill the role required by the guild and thus had more chances of participation.

When I joined their guild (shortly after joining their Discord group) I was greeted by a few members with warm welcomes in the guild’s text chat in the game and as a member had access basic guild features such as the guild member list. By default, new members become part of a hierarchy visualized in the member list as comprising a guild master, officers and members. The game allowed for additional ranks to be custom made. The ranks in Jakob’s guild were labeled “Guild Master”, “Officer”, “Veteran”, “Raider”, “PvP”, “Member”, “Alt”, and “Trainee” in order from highest to lowest. The guild master acted as their leader with exclusive administrative rights, such as giving ranks and privileges to other players. Anyone can create a guild and adopt the role of guild master of which there is only one in any guild. Trustworthy members were promoted to officer status to assist in the policing and organization of the guild. Privileges given to officers included the ability to promote, demote, or remove members from the guild. Achieving veteran status required active long-term engagement in

guild activities, such raids where 40 players may work together to defeat opponents. To participate in raids, members were required to have reached the “maximum level” and to be able to wear the appropriate equipment requested by the guild master. At the max level, a character has gained access to all the abilities and talents of their occupation or “class”, and so can access to the most powerful equipment. Different classes were needed to create balanced group composition for too many or too few of a particular class could be detrimental to a raid’s success. Supportive roles were a necessity even if they often were less popular. Members were encouraged to play on supportive alts if their main could not act in a supportive manner. A good team spirit was judged by the willingness of players to subordinate the glory and fame of their main character so as to create an effective fighting group with balanced skills and abilities

Members were frequently arguing in the guild chat over who was going to play as “healers” who had to tend to the wounds of their co-players. Jakob had heard of members in other communities being “coerced” into playing supportive roles by threats of being removed from it. His guild master seemed more diplomatic however; it meant that his officers and veterans had more often to persuade members into supportive roles. Jakob jokily described his own officers as “the guild master’s lackeys doing his dirty work”. Though this implied they were following orders as commanded by the leader and also phrased as a joke, so as to capture the serious work and contribution they were making. Through humorous discourse they made light of the guild’s social structure allowing contradictions and tensions to be resolved. It is because of such incongruities in social life that jokes are made (Douglas 1968).

Only guild masters and officers are given access to an exclusive “officer chat”, which is invisible to regular members, and so neither Jakob nor I had access. The officers were brief when discussing guild management, although one mentioned a disagreement regarding withdrawals from the guild bank. Game items (armor, weapons, accessories, etc.) and gold (the game’s currency) may be deposited in the guild bank to be shared, and by participating in guild activities money may be gathered collectively. Withdrawal permissions and limits are decided by the guild master. The disagreement was whether the guild master had been withdrawing game currency very generously to himself to purchase luxury items. The virtual wealth can only be used inside the game, but it is valuable for players participating in the economic system within the game world. Some officers argued the guild master deserved the extra gold due to his efforts of creating and maintaining the social infrastructure of the community. Others pointed out while he was not violating the game’s own terms of agreement (which offer some rules governing player conduct such as rules against inappropriate language) he was “violating

the doctrine of good manners”. A few compared it to real-life monetary policies and corruption where executives or CEOs of corporations overly rewarded themselves with corporate shares and other bonuses. Disagreements and conflicts such as these were rarely discussed openly. Regular members seemed to acquiesce, that is comply silently and without protest, this seemed to be part of a hegemonic relationship in which officers were accepted as able to make the final decisions with input from the leader. I never observed anyone challenging decisions made by members with higher ranks. For the most part, communication was mostly casual and good-natured. Most members conversed in the text chat, which I had access to along with the voice communications used preferred by Jakob and his closest guild friends to organize play. Chatting mainly revolved around discussions of co-operative game events such as raiding but also social chatter concerning real-world issues such as work, school, world politics, the weather outside, etc. The players in the group eventually revealed a significant variance in age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, in contrast to the competitive fighting and shooting-game community.

At the time 174 characters were members of the guild, 26 of these the alternate characters of members, so there were only 148 players with their main characters. Membership did not automatically expire, and inactive members were rarely removed. Approximately 50 members were “last seen online” over one month ago, so this reducing the effective active members to 100 members give or take a few. My demographic data is based on the most active users out of these 100 who regularly participated in casual chat as well as the more serious group activities. The typical member was male, Caucasian, between 18 and 35, studying and/or working part-time. There were exceptions, for instance: a British full-time security guard in his forties, a Polish high school girl, and a married 38-year-old Swedish father of two (one of the children occasionally played World of Warcraft with him but was not part of any guild). Some were under the age of 16, but they were not very active and never part of guild activities such as raiding. The oldest active member was a German, male, non-married high school teacher. he was available for gaming activities after and sometimes before working hours, and during weekends when raids were run. Out of the 16 most active members considered the “core” of the group, two were female (12.5 percent) and 14 were male (87.5 percent). Comparing my sample data to those of Nardi’s and others, I find some similarity regarding the gender disparity. Although Nardi clarifies that pinning down precise demographic numbers is impossible (due to lack of official numbers publicly available), her data shows approximately 10 percent of Chinese individuals playing World of Warcraft at Internet cafes are female players (B. Nardi

2010, 19). Samples gathered from similar games internationally shows fluctuations ranging from 9 percent to 20 percent (Yee 2006). Yee's data also indicate that male and female players are motivated to play games of this genre for entirely different reasons. Males desired the feeling of overcoming challenges, becoming powerful, and dominating others. Females desired player interaction, supportive relationships, immersion as "someone else", and escaping real-life problems (Yee 2006, 23-24). This gender difference resonates with my own data indicating that World of Warcraft and similar games may appeal to both genders however in different ways.

Large scale game events such as raids often develop an interdependency or corporate bond of solidarity between the players involved. Raids require playing together as a team and are considered one of the most challenging aspects that the game has to offer. A player alone cannot form a raid group and generally the group members consist of players from the same guild. In earlier versions of WoW, huge teams of 40 players were often required, but recent changes allow for 10 or 25 players to complete certain raids. This also mirrors battle conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan where soldiers often move to small elite forces that raid enemy position, in what are presented as surgical precision operations. These are the celebrated forms of global military operations, and the games can thus be seen as a form of militarization of the mass public involving a certain democratization of war, where the public becomes part of virtual army that mirror the activities of global strategic military events. Raid members are required to have particular equipment and skill, and sometimes players who do not have access to the equipment are deemed not suitable for participation despite having reached the maximum level of skill. The rewards, the booty acquired from raids, are considered of great value. It is often possession of stronger prestigious equipment which allows players to move up the game hierarchy.

When asked what their primary goals were in the game, most male guild members claimed it was completing as many raids as possible each week so as to gain the best possible equipment for their character. A handful of players had supportive roles. Most sought out aggressive roles, so as to be the damage dealers or "DPS" roles, short for "damage per second". They focused on attacking the enemy and dealing as much damage per second as possible. Despite playing together as a team, the damage dealers showed internal competitive behavior: with individual players often seeking to be the most powerful player in the team who dealt the most damage to their opponents. Such individualism has a certain ambiguity. It can be helpful in fostering better play, but it had to be also restrained, for the game often required team co-

ordination and even the carrying out of menial tasks that made more heroic action possible. this might involve, disabling weapon, holding a door open, give examples of coordinated strategies in the game Statistics were recorded during every battle of the damage dealt to enemies. Frequently the “top damage dealer” was announced in the text chat which led players to compare statistics for their characters, Players often ran through simulations to find the best combination of equipment and so optimize their character to become the strongest player in terms of what it could offer. Talking with Jakob and a few others one day, I asked Conradas (one of the two females) who was playing as a male orc, how she decided the gender of her character and she replied:

Over the years I guess I have accumulated just enough annoyance from what is borderline, or just plain and simple, sexual harassment. Getting whispers [private messages] from random players asking my age, if I really am a girl, requesting my Instagram. Once I just had enough, logged off my character, and made a big, manly, male orc and of course I've been treated differently ever since so it just became my main [character].

Jacob made a point about being unable to escape these “creeps”, since they were found all over the internet, as well as in real-life. What’s more, the anonymity of the internet means it can be often “easier” to get away with such actions for there is less immediate repercussions from parents, teachers, fellow students, and other peers. Shame and public embarrassment as forms of social control are not as prominent. Violeta, the second female player, had similar past experiences as Conradas, though she still enjoyed making new characters of either gender. Violeta played primarily as a female blood elf priest; her role was to heal the wounds of her guild members. She enjoyed the raids and other cooperative objectives but explained how she was not too attached to any one character she had created. She preferred to create new characters and progress through the game’s quests and narrative plots several times using several characters. Outside of the game, she attended high school and had a few female friends who played games occasionally, but not World of Warcraft. A male friend of hers introduced her to the game, who was also part of the guild. She spent most of her leisure time playing, however less than her fellow male players. Living with parents and siblings, she often made time for domestic duties often suddenly disappearing from the voice chat or game but returning fifteen or so minutes later. On a few occasions she combined duties with playing, such as when “watching her brothers” while her parents were away. Every so often the sound of an incoming

phone message was picked up by someone's microphone which I eventually learned would in the majority of cases be Violeta's phone, commonly followed by a sigh. It was often her friends who invited her to other real-life events, and she then had to prioritize between different time-consuming activities to a greater extent than felt by her fellow male guild mates. Immersing herself in one of her characters was a way for her to temporarily to forget some of these social obligations.

Relating to the motives of playing World of Warcraft, there was a noticeable pattern in gender differences. These findings resonate with Schull's work examining women gamblers who play solitary non-competitive games against a machine reality to escape real-life issues. Schull argues that society's increasing demands on the affective labor of women in the workplace (public relations) and as caring mothers-daughters can contribute to their gambling. She found her female gamblers were not marginal unemployed women but mature mothers often with full time stressful jobs. She believed there were links between working mothers' increased social obligations and compulsive gambling. In Las Vegas, she interviewed with women gamblers addicted to video poker. She found they gambled from their sense of being overburdened with responsibilities and gambling in virtual machine reality offered a relief from human demands. It is, as Schull puts it, "a means of escape" from what these women experience as an excess of responsibilities to care for others. This escape is symptomatic of unresolved anxieties and tensions from the place of care in a discursively individualist society (Schull 2002, 2). There is a growth of the service economy, women are required to be the smiling face of corporations or institutions, waitress, insurance, banks, teachers, nurses, aged care, social workers, etc. and this obligation to be pleasant and to placate tensions and explain away difficulties is taxing emotionally. Alongside the corporatization of women's affective labor, there are also the increased expectations of care in the home, rising standards for housework, cooking, homework, and pastoral care with respect of children. The romanticizing of the family as an emotional refuge from the world means that this quality time and experience has to be often produced by mothers and wives. Schull argues that the technologies that the gaming industry engineers are designed to capitalize on this desire for an escape. In this way, not only does Schull write about the overwhelming responsibilities that women video poker addicts experience that leads to a desire for escape, but also explores the technology that gamblers interact with. She opposes those who see the addicts as irresponsible arguing that is precisely their responsibilities that make them addicts. Addiction can, in a sense, be designed. The technology of certain games and the organization of the gambling room can be designed to

keep you within the game. Schull is very critical of a gambling industry that emphasizes free consumer choice and autonomy while designing gambling machines and casino spaces that actually undercut free will and are designed to produce addiction.

## **Designing incentives to stay**

Based on Schull's findings I will examine how computer games, like World of Warcraft, are similarly designed to be "addictive", to capture and keep players within their specific virtual world. I will discuss the narrative structure of games and incentives as technologies designed to keep a player in the game and make them return on a regular basis. Often this can become an issue or a problem for the player, their family and friends, and it can lead individuals to neglect real-life social obligations, evade homework or school altogether?

Although World of Warcraft can be played solitarily, the game encourages players to find others to co-operate with on a long-term basis. Many rewards, such as stronger weapons and armor are unlocked for those participating in group activities, such as a raid. Being part of a guild is desirable also for its social relations - membership of a tightly organized community with clear hierarchy and specific goal-oriented roles that require interdependence. This give members a sense of belonging and offer the possibility of forming social bonds while also exploring and developing new identities. For some, these bonds are a reason they keep returning (though not necessarily the sole reason): With few exceptions, Jakob never met most of his online friends in the off-line world, even though he claimed to have developed strong connections with many of his guild members – some even more so than his off-line friends. Since they were spread across countries and living under different life circumstances, the most apparent and practical way of maintaining the relationships was through interaction in this virtual world. It required and produced trust, reliability, sacrifice, emotional care - all aspects of close friendship relationships.

World of Warcraft is in many ways designed to keep the player pre-occupied with periodic tasks and events. After nearly 15 years of development, players rarely run out of game content due to the plethora of quests and other events. Some activities are completed once, others reset once a day or once a week. These recurring goals encourage individuals to regularly return for their character progressively grows in strength and they might fall behind other players if they miss a daily or weekly activity. When an individual reaches the endgame content (i.e. their character has reached maximum level) game challenges become reiterations of

themselves. Repeating content against increasingly tougher computer opponents yields even higher rewards and levels of satisfaction. The game content can be “scaled” to a certain extent proportionally with a player’s progress. Certain challenges require many hours to complete, and the desired reward are often not guaranteed: all computer opponents have a selection of items they may potentially drop; however, each item has a “drop rate” ranging from below one per cent to a hundred. For instance, if a player is in search of a specific rare item with a drop rate of one percent, he or she might have to defeat the relevant computer enemy a hundred times if not more. What this means is that players gamble with their time, they invest and risk their time, in scenarios such as these. This is similar to Schull’s female gamblers who often play to stay on the machine: they play for credit, time, and free spins, rather than money for the online reality is rewarding and sometimes preferable to the taxing human off-line world. Participating in a five-man group scenario against a machine reality (a common activity) lasting an hour or so may not result in any rewards for an individual. But he will find encouragement and reward to be part of a guild: at least it might be a fellow member who will benefit from the group activity, if not yourself. Such exchanges create bonds of reciprocity between players.

Individuals who invest a considerable amount of time will eventually acquire the highest rewards available, although new content has been released periodically for the past decade and a half. To avoid players exhausting the available content too quickly and moving on to something else, digital game developers are moving away from marketing “games as a product” towards “games as a service” (Cai, Chen and Leung 2014). Instead of releasing a game as a finished product, many online game developers now keep pushing updates to the games long after release and introduce mechanics to encourage return visits, such as “daily login bonuses” i.e. you receive a reward which exponentially increases for every consecutive day you log on to the game, etc. The purpose is to keep the players’ attention on the game for as long as possible so as to generate a continuous stream of revenue through monthly subscriptions, advertising and microtransactions that involve low-cost purchases, often cosmetic items for your character. Individuals who invest weeks, months, or years in a game, or a character in a game, may become attached to them. The more time and money invested, the more difficult it becomes to walk away from them.

As earlier discussed, the male desire for dominance, achievements, and overcoming challenges were greater than that of female players. The goal in World of Warcraft might vary depending on who you ask, although judging from the game concepts (which focus on character improvement) it is my impression that most players seek to complete certain tasks to improve



their character. Acquiring the best items seems nearly impossible, but there is (just enough) gratification in gradually progressing towards this goal a seemingly never-ending endeavor.

## **When habit becomes addiction**

Jacob and I planned to meet for a cup of coffee at a local café near the city center to discuss time investment in games. More specifically I had prior to our meeting encouraged a discussion about individuals who could potentially develop a form of addiction. It sparked an interesting consideration of Norwegian youth and adult definitions of “addiction. Some debated the problem of distinguishing between “physical” and “psychological” addiction. Often physical addiction is reserved for painful withdrawal symptoms related to substance abuse such as alcoholism or drugs like heroin. In contrast, psychological addiction is viewed as “mental” or emotional withdrawal symptoms induced by an abrupt ending of certain behavior. This was Jacob’s thoughts discussed the:

Most people will not see it as something serious or even real if it is not a physical addiction. If a person’s brain is relying on a compulsive urge to function, is that not physical? And regardless, is that not to be taken seriously? I cannot imagine anyone in Norway has ever received treatment for video game addiction. Gaming is not taken seriously by the public be it positively or negatively. It is viewed as entertainment for kids, especially by parents, mine included. They made jokes when I was younger that I was addicted to video games, but not anymore, probably because they see me as an adult. To be perfectly honest I play just as much as I used to, maybe even more now that I live alone and can do what I want.

Jacob clarified that he was “hekta” (translated as “hooked”) on World of Warcraft but did not consider himself addicted. This was his non-biased assessment of himself, he facetiously added. In both English and Norwegian the slang term “hooked” may be synonymous with “addicted” though the latter possibly has a more unfavorable connotation. He nevertheless wanted to describe how he perceived gaming addiction, how it can make you lose control of your life. In doing so, he revealed a story about a childhood friend who he always played with. Since middle school they had resided in the same city, yet they rarely met outside the game. Jacob did not have the time to elaborate in full at the café but told me we could later chat on Discord. I have accordingly compiled a series of text messages from that

evening and translated it to give an account of how Jacob thought about gaming addiction given his experience with his close friend:

We've been best friends since middle school around the time we started playing World of Warcraft. In High School, things were a little different. Suddenly we had to balance school, sports, games, relationships, and new friends. I started seeing less of Fredrik at school. He always said he was feeling ill. And so, this went on for at least a year. I guess eventually I decided it was just easier not to ask even though I should've said or done something. Last year of high school he barely attended. Eventually he stopped showing up to social events. And I know I should've told him earlier that the others didn't think less of him for playing games all day, even though at this point there was some speculation as to why he was gone. But they just wanted to see him again. During the Christmas holidays that year I invited him over to my parents' house to play some classic video games for old time's sake, and this was the first time in a long time that we actually talked about our lives. He opened up to me about everything that had been going on with his absences in real-life. The teachers were disappointed when he repeatedly missed his assignments. Eventually a teacher asked Fredrik in front of the class why he bothered coming to school if he didn't do his homework, which he thought humiliating and decided to stay home a few days. To his classmates he was feeling sick, and to his parents he pretended he went to school, actually hiding outside his house waiting for them to go to work before getting inside again. Being up all night, he sometimes just went to bed again sleeping until the afternoon. The longer he was away from school, the more difficult it was to return. What were others going to say when he suddenly returned? What about all the work he had to catch up with? Would his classmates make fun of him? Did they know that he was sitting alone home playing games? Though, it didn't really matter. In the game world he was happy. It made it easier to forget about Fredrik's own problems.

Jakob's description of his friend's commitment to online games also gives an account of how Norwegian youth culture relate to concepts of Internet addiction. It is also interesting to consider the relations and strategies for managing this which may be informal and reproduced amongst the youth. As many do with other forms of addiction, Fredrik felt a sense of shame regarding his gaming habits. In his social network the addiction was seen almost as a taboo subject, with none of his friends discussing the matter seriously. Norway has the ideology of a consensus society that must avoid conflict and embarrassment, which individuals often work

to prevent through silence and avoidance. Only Jacob was aware of Fredrik's actual circumstances during his absence, although he did not want to confirm the rumors, and decided to keep it secret. Jacob also waited until his friend felt comfortable enough to speak freely of the issue by himself, although he admitted a motive was intentional, namely the need to offer a Christmas invitation. His friends seemed to worry about Fredrik yet were uncertain in deciding how to act. Jacob explained that at the time neither he nor his friends considered "addiction" to games as a possibility, and that the gaming activities were merely a result of other underlying issues, e.g. Fredrik was isolating himself due to social anxiety. Playing the game was not in and of itself considered the reason for the addiction. Neither parents had any interest in any computer games. One of the reasons why Fredrik lied to them, was that he assumed they would not understand and instead define his activities as an addiction, he wanted to avoid being pathologized. Golub and Lingley discuss Internet addiction in a Chinese context and argue that: "Youth often reject narratives of addiction as overly conservative and close minded" (2008, 70). This is also my experience, that youth often anticipate their parents' criticism and have strategies and argument for ignoring it. I also think that as youth become adults then issues of identity and social anxiety emerge, they are normal youth experiences, but they become rechanneled into the virtual world whose characters and guilds offer alternative ways of composing identity and relationships.

## **A moral crisis**

In "Just like the Qing Empire," Golub and Lingley write about Internet addiction and its discourse in the People's Republic of China. They argue that the Chinese concern with Internet addiction is part of a broader moral crisis in contemporary China. Internet addiction must be seen as a part of an ongoing realignment of moral relations in Chinese society. According to Golub and Lingley, the Chinese debate on addiction to digital games and the Internet echoes American discussions on the same subject.<sup>5</sup> However, Golub and Langley take a slightly different approach to Internet addiction. They draw on a variation of theoretical frameworks and examine how diagnoses of addiction to video games and the Internet are being "co-

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<sup>5</sup> The Chinese government itself has an ambivalent view regarding the Internet. It is, on one hand, essential for modernization and China's development. On the other hand, it also provides a new public sphere where activists can organize. The Chinese government has also restricted Internet content which they deem unsuitable starting with "the great firewall of China" in 1995, a restriction which is still maintained today.

produced” with broader social issues. Chinese media express a notion that Internet addiction is representative of how China is facing moral tensions and socioeconomic changes. Since 2002 the Chinese press has been featuring cases of unusual and pathological behavior due to video games and the Internet. Recent academic studies have been accompanying these reports, and it is possible to see the notion of Internet addiction as a growing mental disorder as part of discourses of pathologization designed to instill moral panic aimed at shaping social behavior. It is hard to accept figures such as the following which attribute 80% of the dropout rate at university to Internet addiction.

The Institute of Psychology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences estimated that a university of 5000 students typically loses 50 students a year, and 80% of the dropout rate is due to Internet addiction (Funk, 2007). Most recently, the Chinese government has begun to sponsor eight clinics to treat Internet addicts (Cha, 2007). (Golub and Lingley 2008, 62)

Some addiction experts are critical of claims that video games are addictive, but this needs to also be seen in the context of industries like gambling and computer gaming that have a financial interest in sponsoring and dissemination such claims. Some researchers like Schull are critical of the individualizing and medicalizing of problems of addiction as due to some defect in the individual rather than in the deliberate design of games. Golub and Lingley give the example of a mother who tries to engage in conversation with her son, but the son remains absorbed in the game and refuses to notice her. She throws herself on her knees and begs him to go to class, because without school he will fall behind. Golub and Lingley point out:

What may strike Western readers as strange, however, is where the mother wants to take the child: not back to the family home, but to school. As unusual as this choice may seem to Western readers, we would claim that it exemplifies the moral crisis that many Chinese face today. (Golub and Lingley 2008, 68)

In fact, many western parents would experience the same dilemma and see the Internet as distracting children from their schoolwork. Video games offer imaginary alternative places where players are offered the pleasure of play, but without the responsibilities imposed by their parents, teachers, employers . Golub and Lingley write about how the Internet can provide a space where young individuals can explore and experiment with their identities and the social

relationships which lies beyond the control of their parents, and one might add their teachers, employers and other significant others. Developers are trying to tap into youth subculture and its concern with issues of identity and appearance, predominantly in mobile game industry. They are seeking to create new consumer cultures for the young just as was done in the fashion industry of clothes and music. Here developers are also tapping into youth's apprehensiveness and concern with appearances and public profiles, that their identities are in flux as they move between the roles of child and adult, from home and school to workplace and university. In the next chapter I will focus on individuals who are interested in casual mobile gaming styles and the mechanics that are developed to keep these players in the game. I will study new ways of normalizing and mainstreaming gambling technologies through the world of play and leisure.



## Chapter III

# Mobile gaming activities

In this chapter I will examine individuals engaged in casual gaming activities who are perhaps the less obvious gamers. As opposed to hardcore type games, those for casual players are often designed for mobile gaming devices that allow gamers the freedom to stop and start at will. In practice, this means often play during transition between spaces, e.g. using public transport to get to schools, work, shopping centers, airports and other everyday destinations. Accordingly, these games are designed to be played between brief intervals, they do not require an investment or participation in a large block of time. Indeed, the ability of players to start and stop the game at will, can even increase their chances for success by cancelling out poor playing session where the player may have been tired or stressed.

From the early 1990s, game studios began to develop purely handheld gaming systems, such as Nintendo's Game Boy and Sega's Game Gear . In recent times, mobile game developers have shifted more to smartphones whose chip and memory processing power has increased alongside screen size and screen resolution. Other technological advances involving Wi-Fi and software have simplified and sped up the processes of acquiring games. It is possible to download many games and their accessories on smartphone "app stores". This has resulted in the gamer demographic expanding rapidly but also changing as different groups started to participate more, most notably women of all ages. Developers started to target new audiences for whom there emerged new game genres, play styles, and game mechanics.

Another transformation involved in-game purchases, such as exchanging real-world currency for digital currency, becoming increasingly prevalent in contemporary games. In some cases, the rewards from these purchases are arbitrary, based on chance, and designed in a way that needs to be examined for they often are designed to encourage even more purchases. In this context, gambling rewards based on luck and recreational computer games sometimes begin to merge, and this is because the tactics used to keep gamblers gambling are used to keep

the game player playing. This can involve a free spin on a prize wheel, extra health or another free life for one's avatar, and added prize scores. The two activities – gambling and gaming – begin to borrow on each other's ways of manipulating rewards to keep people in the virtual world for as long as possible.

## **Gamer identity**

For many non-gaming Norwegians, the “gamer” label often carries negative connotations. The Western stereotypical gamer is often portrayed as a socially awkward and unhealthy (both psychologically and physically) male adolescent basement-dweller. Such undesirable preconceptions mean that some individuals pretend to have little or no interest in video games, while nevertheless being avid gamers. It is interesting to consider how various players relate to the “gamer” label. While some are proud, others are embarrassed and not challenge the stereotype, but instead seek avoid or reject the notion that they themselves personally are a “gamer”. They accept the stereotype and its application to others but question its applicability to themselves – especially when conversing with non-gamers who do may not value and love the recreational virtual worlds of gaming. The contemporary public perception of gaming enthusiasts can be at times be inconsistent with the actual practices of the average gamer and with the fact that much of the general public also plays games recreationally. I wish to explore two types of examples where gaming individuals explicitly reject being defined as gamers.

Firstly, many “casual” players separate themselves from those they term “hardcore” players. As players have become increasingly more diverse, sub-classes of the gamer type have emerged to differentiate between players. There are those who play complex, often violent and dark themed games with steep learning curves that require much time to create the skills and reflexes needed for good scores. At the other end are those who play the lighter, more accessible games – often with low requirements of previous knowledge and skill so players can play for short bursts of time (casual). Today there are countless variations in play style, genre, and platform that emerge to suit the new gaming technologies for smartphones and tablets and their increased screen space, graphic resolution, computer memory, and processing power. This might have been expected to blur the distinction between hardcore PC players and casual mobile players, and to some extent it has in that hardcore games can now be played on mobile devices. But the migration has not been as large as expected so as to radically efface the division between players and their games.



This is because gaming is a social and cultural activity even when it appears not to be. Most gamers do not consider themselves “gamers” even though they may play daily. They see themselves as having more control over their participation in the game, in the virtual reality, than hardcore gamers who are seen as more imprisoned by the virtual world. The prioritization of everyday life, its duties and obligations, is proudly embraced by casual gamers to redistance themselves from what they see as the mesmeric reality of virtual worlds. To some extent, hardcore gamers function as a symbolic opposite, a caricature, for casual gamers to reground their reality as more real. The designations of casual and hardcore players should not be dismissed even if they are caricatures but need to be studied in terms of the social function of caricatures. The designations are critical in understanding how digital players craft their identities but also police themselves and their everyday activities. To a large extent the negative caricature of hardcore gamers is reproduced because casual gamers need the caricature, the symbolic opposition, to police their own activities in terms of time and the kinds of games they choose to play.

Some players who feel a sense of shame regarding their gaming activities reproduce it so as to avoid the gamer label which they associate with particular kinds of games that are seen to engender addictive behavior. The fear of being associated with the negative aspects of video game addicts leads informants to choose games that allows them to participate in other real-world activities such as work, school, family life and physical recreational sports. A question I habitually asked when becoming acquainted with my informants was whether they considered themselves gamers, and many were not explicit in their response. Common responses were ambiguous, hesitant and almost evasive, such as “Well, maybe”, “I guess so”, etc. There were exceptions, however and sometimes it seemed there was no obvious correlation between those who had no issue identifying as gamers that heavily invest time, money and commitment to games. One difference seemed to be regarding age: those who replied confidently were older (age 20-30) and those who hesitated were younger (age 12-18). Despite dedicating several hours each day playing games, some adolescents were reluctant to identify as gamers – perhaps being more concerned about the opinion of their peers more than adults. It seems that youth also develop these negative labels as part of self-policing sub-cultures to pull friends and themselves out of the gaming culture and back into sports events, studies, cinema, dating, concerts, etc. The negative stereotype is set up as a symbolic opposite to move yourself away from, it is part of what Foucault (1988) calls technologies for working upon the self. The presupposition can also perhaps work in the other direction for hardcore gamers, producing

even tighter self-reinforcing ties between those who play together often and identify with each other. As Goffman (1968) has shown, labels do not have meaning in and of themselves but exist in relationship to different audiences and performances that can redefine their meaning.

Recent studies have shown how certain video games can gather players who make up a majority that differs from the assumed dominant young male audience. A 2006 study showed 71 percent of casual game players were female, most of whom were over 35 years of age (Juul 2009, 80). They were therefore often married, had children, full or part-time work and some even studied at tertiary institutions. Arguments have therefore been made that women have generally more time constraints in their day-to-day routines compared to men due to their different roles in society, and therefore women manage time differently (Winn and Heeter 2009, 3). Women who undertake several roles and responsibilities often simultaneously (e.g. family care and household duties) have greater time pressure, and a gaming experience must therefore be able to deliver sufficient gratification within the available allocated time. Mobile gaming platforms have been creating new audiences alongside their relatively new virtual spaces, and this audience has a different relationship to the virtual world, seeking it often as “time-out” from the competing pressures and duties of everyday while not being able to relinquish the latter. In fact, this “time-out” in virtual reality is often justified as enabling a return with greater commitment and energy to the pressures and duties of everyday life. The latter are often too closely tied up with women’s identities as mothers, wives and carers to be easily relinquished though there is a pleasure in their temporary suspension.

Mobile devices are becoming the dominant platforms for many casual players. It allows short play session when moving between physical spaces that often entail their own obligations and commitments of time and energy. Mobile games allow individuals with demanding schedules to spread their gaming activities into several brief sessions throughout the day rather than in one big demanding session as with hardcore PC gaming. Ironically, many mobile gamers, who see themselves as avoiding game addiction, can match or even exceed hardcore gamers’ time investment in games. Yet, traditional gamers (i.e. non-mobile) will also disregard them as being part of the same gaming subculture as themselves. There is a professional pride within the hardcore gaming subculture in developing skills that require many hours of daily practice to produce fast physical reflexes but also quick and accurate decision making of a split-second nature. The latter also creates a sense of mental superiority, individuals see themselves as working on their bodily reflexes but also as improving their mental capacities even though this is at odds with the wider public caricature of the gamer as physically unfit and a

psychological misfit. For hardcore gamers, the casual play style is not taken as serious play because it does not “improve” or transform those who play it but instead just relaxes its players. There is also the crafting of a masculine warrior culture and ethos in hardcore gaming that is very different to the perceived lighter feminine gaming culture of mobile device. The latter are to some extent feminized not just by their players but as a genre articulating values and crafting subjectivities.

However, in terms of sales , mobile games have increased rapidly and were estimated to account for 51% of the global digital games market in 2018 with \$70.3 billion in revenue. By way of comparison, console games generated \$34.6 billion, and PC games brought in \$32.9 billion (Wijman 2018). But to some extent the increasing minority status of hardcore PC games has increased their sense of eliteness and exclusivity, that they are not for the masses but for a dedicated core elite – one might say of virtual warriors. Before going any further I wish to analyses further recent changing gamer demographics by situating this within a wider history of digital games and players, as well as of developers’ marketing strategies and their target audience.

## **History of gaming**

Electronic games encompass a multiplicity of products and have been reconceptualized several times over the last few decades. Following the first computer games at least four innovations clearly stand out as major alterations to the gaming experience: arcade games, home video game machines, home computer games, and online games. These were technological advances but also improvements in game software understood not just as visual mediums but also technologies for keeping players interested and engaged. What was being reinvented was also the interplay between user and technology, transforming the sociocultural relationship and participation in gaming activities.

The first digital games were a series of experimental software programmed by students at Massachusetts Institute of Technology using research computers. In 1959 MIT introduced the first computer courses. A male community had formed at the university whose members constantly tried to develop stylish new innovations, which they called “hacks”. Later the group called would themselves “hackers”, from which the modern use of the term originates. They worked on programs that could play chess and other exploratory projects, which were effective ways of learning about computing but also about the mental strategies of players. The

development of computing involved also the mapping and development of psychological portraits of players, their motivations, interests, tactics and strategies. One of the first real-time game, (i.e. game events on screen that reacted instantly to user input) 1962, was called *Spacewar*. It was originally used on commercial computers to demonstrate user accessibility/ It featured spaceships being able to shoot torpedoes at each other. The creator asserted that an important aspect of the game was that it was fast paced and required quick reflexes, which made it challenging and interesting. Other games were developed copying its combat style, which many years later led to the fantasy game *Dungeons and Dragons*. It became a cult classic at computer centers.

The first commercial digital games were introduced as coin-operated arcade machines. One of the first machines featured a version of *Spacewar*, it was released in 1971, but received little attention. The table-tennis game *Pong* had greater success soon after. The engineers behind those machines founded the company Atari, which was later to release the classic arcade game, *Space Invader* in 1979. During the next two years sales of arcade machines increased from 40 to 500 million dollars. Primarily they were installed in bars and shops but were also found in amusement parks where youths increasingly started to “hang about”. In the late 1970s a moral panic emerged: in the UK for example there emerged political campaigns whose goal was to reduce the video games threat. It was seen as corrupting youth, creating gang cultures and destroying family life. Likewise. The president of the Philippines believed arcades negatively affected youth discipline and ordered the destruction of 300 machines in 1981. Arcades in the US were also regulated, and official warnings were given about games being dangerous and addictive. Some critics argued players would become more violent through experiencing violence in games . Others argued that “corrupt” arcades were operating as meeting points for youths, keeping them away from productive activities and the supervision of their parents. Arcades eventually found their way to public lounges and restaurants, attracting a new audience. In the late 1970s *Pac-Man* was played by nearly as many female players as males. Arguments were made that in order to attract female players the machines needed to be put in sites which were more socially acceptable places for women and changing the context of playing activities. In general, however, arcade games primarily remained a male-dominant activity.

During the 1970s the games made a slow transition from the large arcades where worrying parents could not control their children as easily, into homes where the machines became extensions of the TV. The first console, the *Odyssey* machine, commercially released

in 1972 marked the beginning of mainstreaming of video games. It made video games part of a consumer culture focused on the nuclear family. In the course of this decade home machines became a normal part of most private households, with the games being increasingly marketed as family entertainment, as a way of unifying and bring the family together in shared entertainment. Games had moved from being a threat to the family to now becoming a way of reinforcing its identity and relationships. The family machines often included sports and puzzle games involving tennis, hockey, and maze games. In 1975 Atari released a home version of the classic *Pong* as its own gaming system. By the end of the decade, the home machines had become reasonably successful, but not yet as popular as the arcade machines. A variety of home machines had been introduced to the market, which eventually collapsed in 1983 due to oversaturation of games and consoles. Additionally, there was a growing interest towards personal computers. Japanese companies, mainly Nintendo, were responsible for reinvigorating the console games market. Attempting to secure a new audience, Nintendo released the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in the West in 1986, with their games aimed at children and mainly boys. Prior to the release of the NES the industry's target audience were old, young, men and women alike. The marketing focus shifted towards boys and this changed the perception of who the digital game consumers were. By the early 1990s gaming had become a boy's activity. Handheld devices like the Sega Game Gear and Atari Lynx were introduced as the first handheld gaming systems, but also here Nintendo dominated with their series of Game Boy products. By 1997 Nintendo had sold 64 million Game Boys worldwide. (Nintendo Co., Ltd. 2016)

Home computer games were developed and played as early as in the late 1970s for personal computers like Apple, Commodore, etc. but mostly by hobbyist individuals and groups. In 1980 *Akalabeth: World of Doom* was released for the Apple II as one of the first digital role-playing games. (Barton 2008, 1) Its dark themes featured gameplay elements like adventures, dungeons, quests, monsters, weapons, and magic. Similar horror themes were in high demand, such as in *Doom* (1993) where the player controls a space marine protagonist fighting demons from Hell. Many games shared similar themes, e.g. *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and *Duke Nukem 3D* (1996) which again mainly targeted a male audience.

In 1996 *Barbie Fashion Designer* was released for Windows and Mac OS, becoming the first commercially successful game for girls. (Dickey 2006, 788) The game allowed players to design their own clothing and style outfits before printing them on paper to be cut out and used to dress up their physical Barbie doll. In the wake of their success, other developers

followed suit designing games including contemporary characteristics associated with young girls such as princesses, ponies, and extensive use of the color pink. Today, publishers still have success with such games, although criticized for their stereotypical feminine themes they reinforce the division between boy games and girl games.

In the late 1990s Internet access became increasingly common in private homes, which has since led to enormous impact internationally on social and cultural life. The decade saw the emergence of a global network of users providing access to information, knowledge, commerce, social networking, and entertainment. In the early 2000s, technological advances greatly improved connectivity speed and accessibility to the Internet, especially through the emergence of Wi-Fi and mobile devices with Wi-Fi features. By 2005 it was estimated that 16 percent of the world population had Internet access, and by 2017 the number increased to 48 percent (International Telecommunication Union 2019). As Internet access became increasingly common in private homes, game developers started to create online games. Some operated as consistent virtual worlds, where players could interact with one another in the same shared alternative space. These online games introduced entirely new genres creating new social arenas, which attracted a mixed demographic that undercut gaming as exclusive for the younger male population. In the 1997, the online fantasy role-playing game *Ultima Online* allowed players to fight, explore, trade, and socialize with thousands of other players. In 2001 it was estimated that 20 - 30% of the players were women (Laber 2001).

The year of 2005 marked the beginning of the flourishing development of casual games aimed at a wider audience, sometimes referred to as “a casual revolution” (Juul 2009). The Nintendo Wii restored family-oriented gaming by merging confined physical activities with a simulated space. This allow families to play playing bowling or tennis in their lounge rooms by just holding a controller and performing the corresponding movements. The games market began to attract users with not much previous gaming experience, who were attracted to the idea of family fun.

Other new games were played in the web browser on a PC and sometimes through social media such as Facebook. The genres of many of these popular games included farm or life simulation, they offered a second life or reality for players. These games overlapped with puzzle games (e.g. *FarmVille* and *Bejeweled*). Some of these casual “social-network games” featured multiplayer aspects but also new marketing strategies that borrowed from multi-level marketing, e.g. Tupperware parties and pyramid schemes that rewarded individuals for recruiting friends, acquaintances, colleagues, etc. Developers created snowballing techniques

whereby they could expand their market of users by tapping into the social relations of players, getting them to recruit other players from their non-game social networks. Many mobile games have in recent times adopted these same marketing strategies, in which rewards are given to players who connect their game account to their social media account, with the intention of recruiting friends who make purchases inside the game. In the following sections I will examine how such marketing strategies can sometimes parallel pyramid schemes and even gambling mechanics.

## **Ethical issues in game design**

Within the restrictions of the game structure, players are often provided with ways to choose their own play style and personalized game experience. Though it is ultimately dictated by the developer and the design decisions they make, this can give a sense of freedom, autonomy and self-possession and investment in the choices made – however misplaced it may be. Game design raises certain ethical issues. How much are developers responsible for addictive player behavior? Do they design and engineer addiction as Schull claims for gamblers? What restrictions should apply to game design in terms of creating addictive and immersive technologies and rewards? Do responsibility solely fall on the parents for their children's addictive behavior, or should governmental authorities intervene to prevent and minimize harm? In contemporary China, developers are required by government law to use regulatory tools in their games (Cao and Downing 2008). As part of the Chinese system for controlling online game anti-addiction, individual players are required to register their national ID numbers when creating online game accounts. Further restrictions are applied to individuals under the age of eighteen, who can only play for two hours a day. These restrictions are only applied to the Chinese version of games, even international games. In the rest of the world, it is not unheard to know of hardcore players who play for eight hours or more consecutively.

Interestingly, however, addictive technologies in modern mobile games work in a quite different way and do not encourage long play sessions. Their design commonly revolves around short play periods that generate rewards and narratives to incentivize returning to the game at a later point in time. The games are often promoted as free to play, but often much of the content that is needed to play more successfully is restricted to users who make real-world purchases in the game. The free version often includes interstitial video advertisements that are meant to annoy or disrupt concentration until a purchase is made. The aim is to use the free

game as a platform to generate a significant and continuous stream of income for the companies. Since mobile games are mostly no longer sold as physical products that you can buy in a brick and mortar store, the games are published on digital markets, such as Apple App Store or Google Play, and so the expense in distributing the game to new players is usually a negligible one-time fee per digital market. The digital nature of virtual realities in games often uses virtual goods and currencies as rewards to incentivize players to recruit others. Since rewarding players with virtual goods or currencies is effectively of no cost, it is a good marketing strategy for corporations keen to expand. Since the games are free and easy to learn, there is little financial risk or cost for a new player to try it. After the new player has made some progress in the game and is hopefully partly captivated by it, incentives are introduced to make real-world transactions for game rewards or benefits. This pricing strategy is referred to as “Freemium” or “Free-to-play”. The core content is available free of charge, but additional “premium” features are obtainable through microtransactions, commonly a few US dollars, but sometimes up to twenty and more. Examples of premium purchases are cosmetic items, digital currency, removal of advertisements, unlocking exclusive characters, etc. I was able to speak with a game designer working for a Norwegian game studio about the ethical issues in game design, and particularly the free-to-play model. He gave a hypothetical example which he argued was nevertheless illustrative for many modern online games. Since he was speaking loosely, I have paraphrased his hypothetical example adding my own figures so as to more accurately reproduce a real-world case.

In a game, there may be a pair of shoes at the price of 2100 gold (game currency). Each game round lasts five minutes and rewards the user 20 gold. The user must play 105 game rounds (which takes 8.75 hours in total) to be able to afford the shoes. However, the user can purchase 1000 gold for 1 real-life dollar. Their credit card is most likely already connected to the App Store, so for only a dollar the gold is available with the touch of a finger. The user makes the purchase three times receiving 3000 gold for three dollars. After obtaining the shoes the user now has 900 gold left and notices a fancy jacket in store and the price is 1100 gold. Another dollar is spent and with a total of 1900 gold the user buys the jacket leaving 800 unused gold in his wallet. Using this tactic, the user must always buy an unnecessary amount of gold, leaving leftover gold that is often close to (but below) the price tag for another item.

Sometimes developers take it a step further. In the above example where the user had 900 gold and wanted to buy the 1100 jacket, normally they could play regularly to earn the remaining 200 gold. To prevent this game currencies are often divided into two types of



currencies e.g. (gold and diamonds are common): one is earned through playing and one is only purchasable with microtransactions. Each item then have two price tags e.g. 2100 gold or 210 diamonds. In this situation if the user was only a single diamond shy of the price, they would not benefit from playing unless they played the 105 matches for the gold requirement. Thus, although it requires many hours, the developer can claim that all items are obtainable freely through playing. Income is generated regardless: either the player chooses to play freely for many hours (which involves watching advertisements and thus generating income for the company), or they must make transactions that leave leftover currency to incentivize the next purchase.

## **A local game studio**

As part of the process of collecting information for this thesis, I applied for a part-time position as a support representative in a game studio located in Bergen. I presented my project and was accepted for the position, and they also offered to provide me with knowledge and the perspective from the industry. This allowed me to gain insight into the processes of research and development, marketing and customer interactions. The job required speaking with customers but also specialized workers such as programmers, game designers, analysts, artists, marketers etc. in my workplace. It required networking with other game studios and attending developer events and gatherings. These diverse contexts helped me to collect empirical data from the industry about its practices, goals and culture.

In this section I will examine new marketing strategies that target youth gamers and new ways of creating revenue flow which move away from selling games outright to selling add-on and various kinds of rent and rewards. I will analyze the emergence of subcultural styles, as developers trying to tap into youth subculture and its concern with issues of identity, appearance and status. Cosmetic game items can include most prominently the avatars that display a person online persona and other prestige add-ons or effects through which players can symbolically distinguish themselves from each other. Some become valuable and rare, and so can be traded for monetary value. Rarity is obviously something produced by developers keen to produce their own local structures of value. The reselling of valuable virtual game artifacts has monetary value but also cultural capital. It has its own prestige value of showing acumen, intelligence, patience and good judgment, which are also psychological qualities admired among game players. Rather than the monetarization of game artefacts subverting the

ethos of games with the warrior culture, they can also reinforce it by demonstrating the same values as skilled game playing, in fact it becomes another version of skilled game playing. For the narrative structure of games often involves find looting - gold or diamonds or some other treasure – and so the reselling of virtual game artefacts becomes an extension of raids for treasure that require patience, skill, intelligence and good judgement,

I want to now expand on previous discussions about the addictive chance-based reward structures that are often most prominently associated with loot boxes. These chance-based rewards sometimes work to blur the line between gaming and gambling. The latter has become one of the most controversial aspects of both industries as the two begin to overlap more and more with games increasingly taking on forms of gambling while gambling has always had the qualities of games – and here most controversially is the domain of children’s play and games.

## QuestLife

The company which I will refer to under the pseudonym of QuestLife was founded in 2011 by the current CEO and his former classmate while studying computer science at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Together they began developing a multiplayer mobile game that could be played seamlessly in real-time across different platforms. Though smartphones were gaining in increasing popularity, synchronous gameplaying was still lacking in this market at the time. They were amongst the first developers globally to successfully release a mobile game where several players could play simultaneously. The idea was to rekindle their childhood experiences of playing the racing game Mario Kart with their friends on the Nintendo machine at home, combined with elements inspired by Happy Three Friends – an adult cartoon known for its cute animals and extreme graphic violence.

Employing the Free-to-play business model, QuestLife finished the development of their first game, which I will call by the pseudonym of *Battle Racing*. They published it in September 2012 on the Google and Apple app stores<sup>6</sup> for an international audience and free of charge. Initially, however, the release was uneventful. Lacking a marketing budget, they began experimenting with alternative marketing strategies, recruiting fellow students to their team along the way. Instead of investing in expensive advertising, their goal was to market the

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<sup>6</sup> Digital distribution services for mobile devices where users can download apps for entertainment, productivity, multimedia, etc.

product through word-of-mouth forms of promotion, that used their existing userbase while also targeting new users. Players were encouraged to participate in contests on social media, e.g. drawing competitions in which participants shared contributions online with their friends. Facebook and Twitter profiles for the game were used to communicate such contests, as well as for posting news of updated content. It was indeed a Twitter campaign that proved to be the deciding factor for the initial success. Users were asked to Tweet<sup>7</sup> a message and hashtag<sup>8</sup> *Battle Racing* along with their in-game username for a chance to win a game reward. The number of daily downloads doubled the same day and increased exponentially during the following weeks. The campaign led to a snowball effect, as players started using the hashtag to recruit their friends. Eventually the game appeared in Twitter's list of worldwide trending hashtags which resulted in more substantial publicity. *Battle Racing* soon reached the top charts in certain regions and sties by the end of the year, including the top of Apple's app store in the US. By 2014 the game had been downloaded 50 million times without investment in paid advertising. A considerable proportion of the players consisted of American high school students sharing messages and photos of themselves playing between classes on social media. The users are still considered the company's foremost marketeers and the focus has been on providing them with ways of creating and sharing interesting content, in this way recruiting new players to the game. Interestingly a large portion of these activities happen spontaneously without direct encouragement from QuestLife. However, social media campaigns are regularly organized to further increase these engagements, e.g. a Tweet from QuestLife could be: "Show us your best gaming moment for a chance to win a prize". Twitter works in a way that allows a user to "follow" another user, which is essentially subscribing to that user's postings. Thus, in this example, when players post on Twitter recordings of themselves playing *Battle Racing 3*, they are also sharing it with all their followers, some of which may be intrigued by the game and download it themselves.

The scope of the *Battle Racing* series as well as the size of the company has increased over the years. From 2015 to 2018 the workforce expanded from eight to 18 employees. Currently there are 20 employees, five of which work part-time in community management or

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<sup>7</sup> A Tweet is a short message shared on Twitter by users, businesses, etc. either publicly (which is the default setting) or visible only to individually approved subscribers.

<sup>8</sup> By including a number sign (#) followed by any keyword (e.g. a movie, game, hobby, etc.) the Twitter message will be categorized, allowing others to click on the keyword or enter it in a search field to browse other messages that include the hashtag.

customer support. Females make up 35% and males 65% of the employees. Some may assist in more than one role within the company, but the positions are roughly divided as such: six programmers, five visual artists, two administrators, one data analyst, four support representatives (part-time) and two community managers (one full-time and one part-time). The average age is 30. Expatriates make up 25% of the team and English is used internally both written and orally as the primary means of communication. In the wake of QuestLife's first successful game, two sequels have since been developed. The games are very similar in nature and each sequel is in a way an upgrade of its predecessor regarding graphical improvements, software performance but also additional gameplay features and mechanics which I will expand on in the following sections. *Battle Racing* and *Battle Racing 2* are officially discontinued and removed from the app stores. The game servers are still maintained so that users who already have the game installed are still able to play. However, most users now exclusively play *Battle Racing 3*, the most recent addition to the series.

Some users play for a brief period of time when they are travelling in-between places such as a bus ride, while others play competitively for many hours a day to reach the top of the leaderboard. There is a considerable fanbase who are devoted to becoming the best players in the game. Rough estimates show in the tens of thousands daily active users, mostly youth. Gender ratio are unclear but likely predominantly male. New communities are constantly formed within the game, but also outside of it. Friendships are made, but conflicts can emerge between rival groups and players. At times, these conflicts escalate to harassment. In many such cases QuestLife cannot directly intervene but instead instructs a user on how to put the harassing player on their "ignore list" which makes it impossible for the ignored player to contact them in the game again. Due to privacy reasons, conversations between players are not monitored or stored. As a support employee, I have observed how these harassment cases sometime involve users sending images of messages sent by other players. Unfortunately, due to how accessible graphic editing tools have become, fake images are often indistinguishable from real ones and in some cases, players attempt to fabricate evidence against rival players. It appears many of the serious players take this game very seriously and make efforts outside of the game narrative in their attempts to win. Hierarchical structures in the game coexist with a sense of pride and status amongst players. Personal skill, avatar clothing styles, prestige items etc. also play a part in the representation of the self and in codifying pride, status, acumen, prowess and other idealized ways of figuring the self.

## Iconography and narrative setting

The narrative setting of *Battle Racing 3* is fictional. Users can customize their own avatar, and the characters available are all anthropomorphized animals drawn and animated in a cartoonish art style. The iconography used is based on a combination of various themes of mythology and contemporary Western pop culture fantasy. Most avatars are inspired by real-world animals e.g. goat, panda, penguin, gorilla, vulture, quokka, giraffe, bear etc. while others are based on mythical creatures e.g. phoenix, unicorn, dragon etc. analogous to those found in Greek mythology, East Asian folklore, etc. Visual variants can be applied to change the appearance of the animal, e.g. transforming a bear to look like Dracula, Frankenstein, a zombie, or a cyborg – creatures popularized in Western fantasy. Further customization can be purchased by spending in-game currency to unlock an abundance of clothing and accessories.

The game is a blend of sci-fi, fantasy, and real-world paraphernalia such as the handheld “fidget spinner” added to the game in 2017 during the time it was popularized as a stress reliever toy around the world. Although the game includes areas such as deserts, tropical islands, etc. many of the iconic areas have properties that resonate with a romanticized Norwegian landscape. In the first *Battle Racing* game, the backdrop scenery of the main menu was brightly colored trees and grass, mountains and clear skies, which does not necessarily represent the typical Norwegian weather, though for many players there is a nationalistic pride in portraying it as romantically so. Apart from this, there is little else that is reminiscent of Norwegian culture in the game series, perhaps due to maintain its internationalization. Moreover, the assumed Norwegian landscape can also be read as the mountains of the USA, Europe or other similar landscapes. In its iconography and narratives, to some extent *Battle Racing 3* is part of the internationalization of identity, youth subcultures, and Norway that is currently occurring also in many other arenas where new cosmopolitan identities are being experimented with. As mentioned earlier, *Battle Racing 3* is designed for a broad audience branching out across multiple countries. Regardless of being developed by a Norwegian company, the game cannot be played in the Norwegian language and Norwegian gamers use English instead. It also is my experience that most Norwegian gamers tend to be well-versed in English.

The importance of language is to some mitigated by the fact that the game itself does not display or require much text, but instead utilizes symbols and graphical conventions. The button to open the shop for clothes and accessories has a hat and a t-shirt on it, and the chat button is a small speech bubble etc. This is similar to how many large corporations operate,

such as IKEA which uses illustrations in their furniture assembly instructions instead of text. The aim is to produce intuitive simplicity and efficient speedy processing. At the end of a race, players can use graphic illustrations to portray emotion: a grinning face, a face with a stuck-out tongue, a crying face, and an angry face. It is not uncommon for video games to offer some form of localization such as translating text and sometimes record new voice lines, although there are rarely enough resources to include less commonly spoken international languages such as Norwegian. Due to the absence of relevant translation Norwegian youth gamers often need to practice their English language skills so as to avoid optional time-consuming textual assistance. This contrasts with other forms of media consumption where textual translation is common or easily available books are translated, and subtitles added to public television and movies, and in many cases English children programs are re-voiced (dubbed) in Norwegian even when they involve cartoon images.

Due to the increasing internationalization of many games, online communities often include members of different nationalities. *Battle Racing 3* has an easy to grasp design compared to hardcore games, in order to secure a broader audience who may be less familiar with gaming. In addition to using internationally recognized symbols, the gameplay and its mechanics are intended to be as intuitive as possible. This is often a design choice the developer must take, to sacrifice complexity that may have more possibilities for intuitiveness with less possibilities. It is also why many hardcore gamers take pride in their skills and symbolically separate themselves from casual gamers. The less complicated games are regarded as too simple and there is less room to distinguish skilled from less skilled players, there is less room to establish symbolic status hierarchies. Interestingly, *Battle Racing 3* borrows elements from both casual and hardcore style games, in that it has simple controls and gameplay elements (touch specific areas on the smartphone screen to either jump, duck or attack), and if the player loses it is quite forgiving it that they are still often rewarded only less, yet the game requires fast reflexes and some specialized game knowledge to be able to compete with the higher ranking players.

## **Gameplay mechanics**

When opening the game for the first time, users must go through a tutorial teaching them the basic aims, moves and strategies. A red squirrel (the player) and a blue bear (computer opponent) can be seen in a forest scenery standing in a human-like fashion in front of a starting

line before a message appears: “Let’s race”. A three second countdown starts ticking and the characters start running automatically until the user collides with the side of some raised terrain. The bear jumps over the terrain obstacle continue running out of the player’s view. A button appears on the screen displaying an upwards pointing arrow and pressing it will make the character jump. After assuring the user has learned how to jump the character now runs into a cave that decreases in size until they again collide and cannot continue in a running position. A counterpart button appears with a downwards pointing arrow making the character duck and slide when pressed. Other obstacles and lessons combine the two buttons, such as facing a large wall and climbing it by repeatedly pressing the jump button etc. The third and final button available during the race appears when the user runs through a floating box with a question mark known as a “power-up”. The box disappears when hit by a contestant and provides the one-time use (per pick up) of a randomly chosen weapon or utility. The power-up button will change its icon to display when the power-up is received; and this will be indicated by two symbols: a shield symbol that operates as a protective magical shield barrier; and a lightning symbol for the lightning storm that can strike down opponents. In the tutorial, the power-up will always be the iconic sawblade with which fans often associate the game. The character approaches the blue bear as indicated during the lesson and keeps running until the user launches the power-up, which is a sawblade the size of the avatars themselves that heads towards the bear slicing it and splattering its blood and intestines before the bear vanishes shortly after. The user then reaches the finishing line and the blue bear reappears covered in bandage. A text dialogue (one of the few) shows him saying: “You got me good! Let’s race again”. Death is impermanent, i.e. players are not removed from the race when killed; they disappear for a few seconds during a death animation before reappearing and continue running. The user should now have learned the basic mechanics and can start racing against others. During regular races four players with similar skill will be randomly chosen to compete against each other. Such game iconography in part refers to a subgenre of horror movies known as splatter movies, only now the portrayals of gore and graphic violence are not so realistic, but couched in a cartoon fantasy mode – e.g. blue bear – which allows the audience to redistance itself from this violence and to recode it as play and light entertainment. Such ambiguity is also perhaps intended to allay some of the fears of parents over excessive violence, by making it fun and absurd fantasy meant only for entertainment and relaxation. It is almost as though parents recognize the necessity for grotesque implausible violence as part of relaxation and the release of tensions from everyday life.

## Ranking hierarchy

In *Battle Racing 3*, experience points are gained through racing which increases a player's level incrementally from level 1 through 30. This in turn unlocks new power-ups – protective shields and attack weapons. At level 30, it is possible to “prestige”, resetting the level to 1. Further rewards are then acquired by moving up to 30 once more. Users can prestige 12 times before reaching “master levels”. These have similar mechanics to prestige, but the skill requirements for master levels are unfeasibly high. They were implemented as a response to several highly active players reaching maximum prestige and requesting further levels in the game.

Based on their finishing position at the end of a race, players receive rating points that increase or decrease their league ranking. New players start in the “Wood” league followed by “Bronze”, “Silver”, “Gold”, “Platinum”, and finally the “Elite” league. After leaving the Wood league the following leagues have various amounts of tiers e.g. gold players will begin in Gold V and progress through Gold IV, Gold III, Gold II and Gold I before reaching Platinum V. Similar ranking systems are used in other games, such as previously discussed CS:GO on PC. Ranks are also commonly used to refer to players of other games who also speak of “the elites” when referring to their best performing players. Labels also carry shame or mild embarrassment just as higher-ranking CS:GO players will derogatorily use the term “silvers” to refer to those performing poorly by their standards.

Finishing first produces a reward of 15 rating points. The requirement for the Elite league is 60,000 rating points, meaning hypothetically being placed first in 4,000 races consecutively. Thus, it is loyal game playing that will provide access to the top league. Optimistically, this would take a little less than 67 hours since a race typically takes a minute to complete. Realistically, however, users invest hundreds of hours to reach Elite league, and afterwards often more. A season lasts 14 days and the Elite player with the highest rating will win an exclusive reward, the Golden Fox avatar, at the end of each cycle. Ratings exceeding 60,000 will then have their excess bonus rating removed and a new season begins. When the season system was first implemented, there were complaints from users who expressed dissatisfaction with their rating points vanishing and that their hard work was for nothing. And so, “Legendary rating” was added for users to showcase the sum of their accumulated excess rating. These points do not affect gameplay, although users seemed satisfied with the addition of it. It is used by many as a form of symbolic status indicator, regardless of the lack of designed incentives for it in current season. Further profile icons are given out as rewards for reaching certain thresholds, such as reaching the 100,000 legendary rating. There is a sense of pride in



displaying these numbers and players can be observed on forums sharing their milestones and posting pictures of relevant icons.

I believe it is the act of progressing, reaching milestones, completing achievements, and presenting these accomplishments to others which are deciding factors in keeping the players in the game. In a mobile game designed to be played in short bursts of time, the rewards must then be given frequently to ensure player satisfaction but not too large in quantity or even quality to ensure the user will not obtain all content (or wanted content) too quickly. This is indeed an economical decision for the company, as the Free-to-play business model weighs heavily on maximizing total amount of time spent in the game where users can watch advertisement videos or pay for microtransactions so as to progress more rapidly up and through the game levels. This resonates with how rewards for completing various challenges are structured in the game.

## **Reward structures**

Special avatars, costume effects, and various forms of weapons are unlocked by spending in-game currency, which in turn can require real currency. Coins and gems can be acquired by running races and completing challenge. Purchases through microtransactions are often a quick convenient way of moving up the symbolic ladder. Only a few challenges are active at any given time and will be replaced once completed with new randomly picked challenges. Completing challenges will give the player currency which can be spent to unlock virtual avatars, accessories, and clothing. The objectives of the challenges might be: “Play two races”, “Win 10 games” and “Get 80 kills”. Optional rewards can appear at various intervals and can include users choosing to watch a 30 second video advertisement so as to be rewarded with virtual coins or ignore the offer altogether (skipping the advertisement but also the coin reward). Once per day a login bonus can be collected. This reward increases for every consecutive day the user logs on but resets if not collected within 24 hours. The reward regimes that reward daily logins are found in many contemporary online games, it ensures a constant presence, or rather regular revisit into the virtual world. I have observed players with hundreds of consecutive days, who will be without internet access due to traveling and request that we maintain their series of days without them logging in, which we usually accept to establish some goodwill. Starting on the tenth consecutive day the reward will include a “spin” on a spinning prize wheel rewarding a random amount of experience and coins. Users can optionally

watch an advertisement to receive two spins instead of one. This reward structure also exists in traditional gambling machines, e.g. a free spin or turn on the electronic slot machine. What is addictive in the game world is the symbolic prestige economy and not just the game.

There are interstitial video advertisements which appear after a certain number of races which do not provide any reward. Any purchase made will disable these advertisements for a user permanently, and the lowest priced transaction is currently at 11 NOK. Other optional advertisements will however still be offered for their bonus rewards. Excessive advertisements and exclusive premium content locked behind a paywall are two major complaints by mobile gamers. The complaints are often “too many ads!” or “this game is p2w” short for “pay to win”, which is a claim that the game is designed in a way which requires players to pay real currency in order to win. In terms of the Free-to-play model, making advertisements optional while give reward points or removable by a one-time purchase is a way of keeping customers satisfied while generating revenue for the company. The frequent argument used by free-to-play developers that premium content is obtainable through play, omits to mention the large amount of time that is required to obtain it for free. To try to counteract player resistance and anger over the large time investment needed, developers have also created more random rewards, namely the increasingly popular chance-based “loot boxes”. Again, this seems to overlap with the reward strategies of gambling which also counteract fatigue and anger over investments of time and money by offering the occasional chanced windfall.

## **Loot box controversy**

Virtual cosmetics and aesthetic customization are popular elements of contemporary gaming culture, predominantly within online multiplayer games. The term “skins” is often used to refer to alternative visual styles of virtual goods or avatars (e.g. transforming the bear to look like Frankenstein). These aesthetic items are commonly unlocked by purchasing “loot boxes”: a form of monetization increasingly prevalent in contemporary games that has gained a considerable amount of international attention and criticism. Typically, a loot box is a purchasable virtual crate containing a selection of game items – or loot – of which one of these is rewarded to the player based on chance. Items are often labeled “common”, “uncommon”, “rare”, “epic”, “legendary”, or similar, and so the chances of acquiring a specific item depends on its rarity. Most items in a loot box are intentionally dull and uninteresting, while rarer ones are designed to impress and create renown, loyalty and ongoing play. Loot boxes are typically

priced between 10 to 50 Norwegian kroners. Similar to playing the lottery, however, the prize is virtual and even then, rarely what the individual desires. Since the cost per loot box is relatively low, there is a motivation for users to make another purchase in the hope of acquiring the desired reward. The boxes are designed to prolong interest and investment in the game by giving players small bits and pieces that keep them interested and like to invest even more money in other loot boxes that may increase their chance of finding what they seek.

Chance based rewards are spreading rapidly in the digital game market and work to mainstream taking risks. They are part of the process where probability becomes institutionalized as a chance taking mechanisms that provides some sort of commentary or affirmation of the uniqueness of the individual. Luck and chance are often not put down to probability – let alone the mathematical algorithms that are designed to produce it in games but instead often operate to define the player as a charmed character. His choice of avatars and the way he plays may become also his rituals for maintaining his charm in the same way as Gmelch (1971) shows how professional baseball players develop lucky charms rituals prior to matches. The logic of the loot box prize is not only found in video games, but also in other medias and activities, such as auctions, warehouse sales, reality shows like *Storage Wars* where buyers bid on storage facilities containing various jumbled items of unknown value that can be sold later for potential profit. Loot boxes similarly offer a similar game of chance, of rummaging through seemingly jumbled trash to find treasure only now users must risk or wager fictional currency earned through play and investment of time, or real money, for a seemingly random reward. The logic of probability and the science of psychology behind its mathematics must remain hidden from players to cultivate the magic of their charmed chance. Instead players are invited to assimilate their game experience to other everyday chanced experiences of finding treasure at a garage sale, market stall, and eBay or some other online auction-selling platform. Somehow the charmed individual finds “gold” through his acumen and decision-making skills. Paradoxically, the games of chance that are governed by impersonal mathematical algorithms end up sustaining logics of individualism.

During fieldwork whenever a player acquired an extraordinary item, others expressed enthusiasm, sometimes asking how much money they had to spend – to which the answer was either “A lot” or more commonly “I have no idea”. Having been invited to their online Discord community I attempted to spark a conversation one evening regarding microtransactions by posting in the chat. Three users agreed it was of no issue if the rewards were mostly cosmetic. Microtransactions were not a concern if no direct advantages were given to players who paid

more. In their experience, games offering purchasable cosmetics often resulted in a wider range of stylistic items. If developers directly profit for each new item they introduced, the incentive for expanding their content increases, which leads to more stylistic choices for the users. Two other members who responded were entirely against any additional charges within a game. “I miss the old days when you paid for a game and that game was a complete experience” one reminisced. The other approved of this sentiment and added:

You know loot boxes in CS:GO, right? What pisses me off is how they always just give them to you like they’re some kind of reward, but to actually open them you need to spend real money for a freakin’ key. I’m basically stockpiling all these useless crates which I didn’t ask for, just sitting there in my inventory waiting to be unlocked. I mean, I already bought the game and now they want me to pay more for some virtual lottery? Nah, man. I’m good. I’d rather spend my money on some Kinder Surprises.

The analogy between loot boxes and Kinder Surprise Eggs is a reference to a statement made by major game publishers during an investigation by a committee of the British House of Commons. Representatives from Electronic Arts (EA) and Epic Games were sent to answer questions from the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee on the issues of immersive and addictive technologies. EA argued that the loot boxes in their games were entirely unrelated to gambling pointing to a lack of evidence. Certain quotes from the inquiry have circulated on social medias and news aggregation websites (e.g. Twitter and Reddit) and are still repeated by gamers mockingly, as a form of criticism used to satirize the corporate responses to the gambling issue. EA representatives clarified how that instead of the term “loot boxes” they preferred the term “surprise mechanics” which they also described as “ethical and fun”. The two statements are often sarcastically recited by gamers whenever loot boxes are mentioned. EA interestingly compared the mechanics to children’s toys that comes as surprises in chocolate eggs (e.g. Kinder Eggs and Hatchimals) so as to normalize and mainstream gambling-gaming technologies. Less than two years earlier a Reddit user reached out to EA regarding their newly released game, Star Wars Battlefront II. Having paid 80 dollars for the special edition, they were disappointed that popular characters such as Darth Vader were accessible only through fifty hours of game progression per character, or alternatively by purchasing with real currency. The official response explained how the intent was to “provide players with a sense of pride and accomplishment for unlocking different heroes” which received a negative comment score of roughly 668,000 (users can leave a positive or negative

rating on a Reddit post or comment). This enormous collective reaction suggests a growing resentment towards what is slowly becoming the industry standard: restricting game content, i.e. options for cosmetic styles and self-representation, accessible only by unreasonable time investment or paying more money. Yet, these games are still growing in popularity and the business model remains profitable indicating that a substantial number of gamers are indeed attracted to the game of probability and willing to invest small amounts of money for the sake of their online identities. In the same way as individuals invest in clothes, shoes and haircuts to stylize themselves in everyday life, to manage the appearance of the public self, so they are willing to invest money in their online public persona. The virtual reality and personas of games are nevertheless real-life experiences for players – social and cultural spaces that demand impression management (Goffman 1959).

There is often little or no transparency regarding chance mechanics in video games, such as listing the percentages of success and failure underpinning game algorithms. Developers are not required to disclose this information which gives an indication of the power of the gaming-gambling corporate industry depending on a country's laws and regulations. In China, all online game publishers are required to provide probability of these virtual items and services (McAloon 2016). However, under pressure from churches, parents, partners of addicts, social welfare workers and other concerned citizens, politicians and legislators in a few countries are starting to act even if it only often means just setting up an inquiry. Norwegian authorities are currently considering changes to gambling laws to include certain digital game mechanics. The Belgium government has been more active and has already determined that loot box systems were a violation of their gambling laws. They required several game studios to remove those features for Belgium players. Indeed, it is forbidden to operate a game of chance in Belgium without a permit issued by the government gambling agency. In April 2018, the Belgium Gaming Commission's released a research report on digital loot boxes based on an examination of four popular video games: Overwatch, Star Wars Battlefront II, FIFA 18, and CS:GO. Certain loot boxes, such as in CS:GO, came to be considered a game of chance since all the constitutive elements of gambling were present in them according to Belgium law. The Commission noted how gambling mechanics in games are not always obvious because they are hidden as secondary options that are supposedly voluntary. The Commission also noted the close similarity between the virtual reality of games and of gambling slot machines

[...] loot boxes [are] a key role in the course of the game, thereby turning them into an essential element of the game in order to increase the chances of winning or achieving progress more quickly in the game. Sometimes the player can play loot boxes for free without paying, but here too the player is confronted with animations that are very similar to animations used in slot machine operation. (Research Report on Loot Boxes 2018)

The report states there is no single systematic protection for consumers from digital gambling mechanics, especially when they have not chosen to gamble or may even be underage and unable to gamble. There was a growing suspicion that a gambling culture was being introduced and promoted via digital games and that this might even be socializing children into this gambling culture, normalizing it. Due to the upsurge of loot boxes being sold and a lack of regulation, consumers were seen as increasingly exposed and made to participate in gambling through digital games. For many government and non-government organizations, this has highlighted the growing problem of unsupervised youngsters who begin to normalize gambling as a common activity – something which can now be seen in sports betting. To quote an Australia government report “sports betting has become normalized among this population of young men, facilitated by the growing accessibility of gambling and new technologies” (Jenkinson, de Lacy-Vawdon and Carroll 2018).

The blurring of gaming and gambling also occurs since digital game items in some cases have real monetary value. Loot boxes, keys for unlocking them, and the rewards are traded on official digital gaming marketplace, e.g. Steam Community Market. Depending on the virtual good, prices can range from a few cents to over a thousand dollars. Cosmetic style variations of the virtual knives used as weapons are amongst the highest priced items in the CS:GO market: “Factory New, Karambit, Lore” denotes a specific quality, knife, and look that is currently listed at around 1,500 dollars or almost 14,000 kroners. Instead of paying these high prices, it is then more lucrative to play a game of chance for 30 kroners or so to potentially acquire these prestige items. The point is that value structures are created and indeed designed so as to create markets of value for players.

This normalization of taking risks also exists in Norwegian gaming groups. During my engagement in different communities I have observed an evident enthusiasm for prestige cosmetic items in various games. At my current workplace loot box mechanics are implemented in the games, although with some variations e.g. a user will not receive a reward

which they already own, and it does not include the prestige items and avatars that must be earned through play. Game developers are seeking new ways of creating revenue flows, moving away from buying games, as there is no money in the sale of the games. These are given away so as to create a popular platform and forums where real off-line money is increasingly involved in the ongoing purchase of game paraphernalia. The virtual items in games are aimed at youths and can include popular items such as virtual backwards cap, brightly colored hair, studded leather jackets, shutter shades, skateboards, etc. Users can inspect other players' avatars and the way they are outfitted so as to compare and evaluate their own. Whereas previously offline items such as a personal car, bike, stereo, room decorations and clothes served to define and articulate youth identity, this is now mediated through the cosmetics and aesthetics of virtual realities and the virtual identities that are crafted and embraced therein.

Given the time players spend in these second worlds and the relationships they develop there, there is an increasing investment of the self in it. In the same way as cars, furniture, clothes, jewelry etc. craft and objectify the self in the non-online world, so players need objectification possibilities in the online world that are virtual yet real. In what has been termed the dramaturgical approach, Goffman (1959) argued that individuals perform a series of roles, wearing different symbolic masks for different social contexts. The different parts we play are determined by the situations we find ourselves in, more specifically how we think we are coming across to other individuals. The individual learns to alter and adapt the presentation of the self in order to satisfy different audiences. This is what he referred to as impression management – the idea that individuals manage their impressions that they convey to others during social interactions. Adapting this framework to online worlds, might be useful to understand subcultural identities created through the presentation of self in the virtual world. Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) argue that in online environments such as blogging and the online game *Second Life*, enhanced potential exists for editing the self, and that there are different gradations in editing the self. They found that instead of adopting other whole personae, individuals were more likely to re-create their offline selves in the online world while editing certain aspects of the self. To some degree, “alts” in games can be considered a manifestation of Goffman's claim that we enact different roles and identities in everyday life for different audiences and these can require their own props and stage settings. As earlier discussed, when Jakob had created several characters in *World of Warcraft*, he primarily maintained his main (main character) but sometimes a few of his alts (alternate characters)

functioning as their alter egos. Although alter egos might be too extreme to compare to Goffman's more subtle alterations in social interactions, it makes sense that most players maintain a primary character perhaps an edited re-creation of their selves, but to satisfy other situations change to their alternative characters. This also applies to *Battle Racing 3* where players can furnish different virtual clothing for their avatar and indeed save certain custom sets of apparel (e.g. a specific jacket, trousers, hat, etc. as "Outfit 1") which allows the users to quickly change appearances at will – a very popular feature. This can also be used to manage transitions in the game e.g. to escape a losing streak or poor performance by shifting to another persona, or to intensify the violence etc.

In more recent years, developers of various genres have progressively included new ways of customizing user's avatars in terms of appearances, clothing, and accessories. These are often designed to specifically reflect and create diverse contemporary youth styles. Developers are partly attempting to tap into youth subculture and its value structures and concerns with issues of personal identity and appearance. They are seeking to create new consumer cultures for the young, tapping into their apprehensiveness and concern with public appearances and public profiles, how their new emerging adult self is going to be judged. Some youths might find it difficult to oppose societal standards in real-life contexts and so their online avatars serve to symbolically separate them from existing socio-cultural formations that impinge upon them in terms of class, race, gender, ethnicity and religion. It is not always a question of escaping these codifications of the self but also remaking their possibilities within a collective milieu where youth are known to experiment with meaning and identity. The digital gaming scene can sometimes provide a new arena for cultural-social experimentation, such as the articulation and reinvention of youth identity and its various possibilities. Sometimes the conflicts with the dominant mainstream culture can transfer from the game to the real-world and can be articulated as alternative hairstyles and clothing but also ways of talking, walking and other forms of embodied culture. Some shared beliefs and values can be crafted into new an off-line sense of identity that may span across different age groups within the gaming subculture. My workplace does have people with a similar age bracket 20-40 but is also a noticeable example where diverse employees consider themselves gamers. Even though the company is growing, a discussion was held where many articulated the idea of remaining as an indie-developer type to continue making games we like to play ourselves, rather than becoming a giant mainstream corporation focusing on maximizing profits. Some employees have brightly colored hair, and some wear sweatpants to work. At last year's game developer convention



most of us attended with our company hoodies, blending in with most of the attendees. I have not been to many business-related conventions, but I imagine suits, or a shirt and perhaps a tie may be the standard. Certainly, there were exceptions as dissimilarities exist within gaming subculture and more broadly within the software culture. A gaming subculture always exists in relationship to another gaming subculture to rephrase Hebdige, articulating a relationship towards mainstream society so as partly to disrupt the reproduction of the mass culture. The desire is not so much to overthrow as to divert.

It is interesting to look at the representation of self in games, since in many cases the player's representation of themselves in relation to others happens through an avatar in each game which has its own fictive universe. It has its own geography, architectures, creatures and beings with their own set of clothing styles and other paraphernalia, but also motives, strategies and movements. Though there are similarities between the games themselves and with real-world styles in fashion, music, etc. many games and their communities seem to cultivate their own sense of style with its own symbolic universe. Cosmetic items often do not benefit gameplay in any way, quite the opposite: some players will rather wear items that negatively affect their character compared to better items, so as to give the desired look for their character. Below I will provide three brief examples of popular video games in which virtual cosmetics are irrelevant to the main game objective, but where players collectively regard visual style as an important, if not the most important aspect of the game.

In *Dark Souls 3* the player assumes the role of a cursed character who fights horrific monsters in a dark themed setting. It is primarily combat oriented, as the player starts as a weak nobody and through experience and combat becomes stronger and more powerful. Many similar games share the symbolic structure of boys becoming men<sup>9</sup> (e.g. *Bloodborne*, *Fable*, *The Legend of Zelda*, etc.). *Dark Souls 3* is known to be one of the most challenging games to finish in terms of computer difficulty. Every item upgrade is essential, yet the game has been nicknamed *Fashion Souls*, since players would rather search for armor and decorative items for their outfit and discard beneficial but unpleasant looking equipment. Forums for the communities exist where players share pictures of their character's different outfits. Instead of

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<sup>9</sup> This is something that Eliade (1964) has commented upon in his analysis of fairytales. He notes how the decline of initiation rituals corresponds with the rise of fairy tales involving a symbolic journey of trials and tests for creating a child into adulthood.

using protective heavy armor plates, some may choose instead to wear weaker leather armor due to its sleeker aesthetic looks (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2. A game snapshot of a female character created by a female player partly using herself as inspiration. Image downloaded from [https://www.reddit.com/r/fashionsouls/comments/bnnz19/bloodborne\\_my\\_hunter/](https://www.reddit.com/r/fashionsouls/comments/bnnz19/bloodborne_my_hunter/) in November 2019.

To avoid players leaving the game in favor of other games by creating some continuity of identification, the developers of World of Warcraft added a transmogrification system, in which players could transform the visuals of their current equipment into any previously owned equipment. Prior to this feature being introduced to the game, players were often seen wearing certain armor types with properties that did not benefit their role or class, e.g. a hunter principally wearing chain mail armor could be seen wearing cloth armor (intended for magic classes) instead. Now, however, it was easier to customize the visual style of their avatar, though acquiring certain visual looks could still prove a challenge. A 22-year old male participant explained how he had spent at least two months attempting to complete his set of armor (see fig. 3). It did not cost him anything other than time, but the time it took made him almost give up. Now, however, he did not regret completing the set. The properties of the equipment were obsolete, but the visual look was something few others had.



Fig. 3. A Dwarf Paladin player character named “Bolani” in his transmogrified armor. Image captured in-game November 2019.

In CS:GO symbolic status was sometimes associated with the look of the weapons rather than personal skill or rank of online characters. As mentioned previously, weapon-skins be traded between players for real money, some visual looks were priced at 4,000 NOK and above. Amongst the most popular and expensive items were different visual versions of the knife (see fig. 4). These prestige items are extremely rare rewards from loot boxes, and such extraordinary highly valued prizes are meant to keep players buying loot boxes, in the same way as spectacular lottery prizes keep many individuals buying lottery tickets even when they do not win. CS:GO is a popular game for live streaming, it is played by an assortment of players – professionals, hobbyist, and casual gamers and in a variety of contexts tournaments, friendly matches, but more often regular play. As gaming expands, it is also transforming for some into a form of spectator sport that can involve thousands of fans. More recently some of these games are televised which contributes to the commodification of skins and appearances. Playing a game might be a professional streamer’s workday and so collecting rare items for them is not uncommon. Fans watching may then see their favorite player sporting a certain look and wish to imitate them.



Fig. 4. The Karambit Doppler knife currently listed at around 4,000 Norwegian kroner. Image downloaded from <https://csgowallpapers.com/wallpaper/571-karambit-doppler> in November 2019.

In many games, including *Battle Racing 3*, there are two main reasons for the demand of certain items: the wish to obtain rare items few others possess, to stand out from the crowd, and the wish to obtain the most prestigious items via a victory against others, which makes those items a kind of trophy, a way of memorializing a desire for exceptional individualism or exceptional team playing. As noted earlier, many players are part of groups in particular games, and these are called “clans” or in World of Warcraft “guilds”. They compete in joints efforts to receive clan rewards. This way clan members receive equal items together, as a form of symbolic egalitarianism and solidarity. In the following section I will examine such social mechanisms which are essential game dynamics and team camaraderie. The shared spoils help overcome potential divisions – internal rivalries, hierarchies, jealousy and personal animosity between clan or guild members. Interestingly, the spoils of war have often functioned in the same way for invading armies

## Social mechanics

To be able to chat, send or receive gifts, and play in teams in *Battle Racing 3*, users must add another player to their friend list. Experienced players can become a mentor so as to teach less

experienced recruits the ropes of the game. It is a form of community self-help but also self-policing that incorporates a new recruit into the norms, expectations and hierarchy of a group. The recruits receive rewards (a new avatar) for completing their training, as do their mentors who get extraordinary avatars for training several recruits. Game developers build in the cost of socialization in terms of time and effort into their reward structure and their narrative plots. Within normal game use, players can create or join clan communities to compete against other similar sized clans so as to receive a shared clan rating. Member roles works very similarly to those in *World of Warcraft*: the leader of the clan decides who can join, officers are promoted for skill and their work in policing the clan. Weekly challenges can be completed for rewards that are given to each member. Players can also chat in the clan so as to discuss strategies such as which power-up skills to use, which game areas to practice on, etc. Chatting can be about building a sense of camaraderie between group members, but sometimes tense situations escalate quickly between rival clans. Accusations of cheating are reported weekly between groups, who accuse their rivals of illicit tactics, such as: infiltrating a clan; stealing a rival user's accounts so as to sabotage a rival clan; cheating by using software to modify the game to their advantage, etc. Finding hard evidence of cheating and permanently a user's account can create disorder within the clan they belong to. Sometimes these leads clan members joint together and form an appeal group that claims the expelled user is innocent and demand their account to be reinstated. Clans in *Battle Racing 3* differ in types, they are hierarchically ranked with competitive clans whose members must meet certain requirements, e.g. rank, rating, level to join, and social clans that are open to new players.

The typical *Battle Racing 3* player is mostly a male high schooler. Many of these young players are very active on social media, and it is here that the game is marketed. The costs of running paid marketing us high, so other strategies have been used by corporations to promote the game and it is often best to use the testimony of players for this confers greater authenticity than a paid actor in an advertisement. According to our VP of Business and Marketing, less than 5% of people who download any app on their mobile device spend money in it. Thus, social media campaigns on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have been key components in marketing of these new online entertainment commodities. Until recently the marketing budget for *Battle Racing 3* has been nonexistent. Instead, the focus was on creating content that users would want to share with others. For instance, a video on YouTube of a family playing the game spread during December holidays and received millions of views. Though the game targets youths in some ways still, it has transformed from an over-the-top violent adult cartoon-

like game, to become more family oriented. For example, a problem with a distributor resulted in the removal of the graphical violence due to criticisms from other users and parents. Following the change, we received countless complaints from players who believed it was not as fun or exciting without the bloody gore. Violence in video games has been an issue in terms of political correctness and in terms of balancing cult followings versus mainstreaming a game.

The desire to reducing or remove violence in computer games reproduces similar debates over other mediums such as violence in children's fairy tales or cartoons. Modern adaptations of popular fairy tales, such as Grimms, contain little violence in contrast to the original early 19th century versions. It is part of a broader social process in which consumer culture is transforming and adapting itself to comply with higher standards of social conduct, which Norbert Elias (1994) dubbed "the civilizing process".

Elias unpacks European history and the emergence of the modern state – how the division of labor effectively required certain social interactions between various groups of specialized individuals which he calls extending the "chains of interdependence". These complex networks of social interactions gradually reduced inequality between classes and the standards for conducts such as sexual behavior and violence were transformed by rising thresholds of shame and embarrassment. In addition to external power from the state claiming monopoly for legitimate violence, internalized self-restraint imposed by the interconnected web of social relations have resulted in a reduction of public forms of violence since the Middle Ages. For instance, the removal of public slaughter of animals, public execution, torture and other punishments, serving the whole animal on the dining table, and handling and burial of corpses by relatives. Elias also argues that contemporary society requires leisure activities to mimic primary emotions from earlier societies from when everyday life was more dangerous. Films, TV, and now computer games reproduce the world of violence in distanced worlds of fantasy.

Competitive activities such as sports, and in modern times competitive gaming, imitate in a way the contest of battle, however with minimal risk of death or injuries. It is allowing the mimicking and reproduction of cultural beliefs, values, experiences and opportunities through social interaction from which a habitus is formed, which in turn structures but also restrains human behavior in some way. The use of violence in fiction such as gaming activities is a controversial issue which reveals a disparity of social values often between a younger generation of gamer subcultures and those of some parents of older generations. While some believe there is no harm in the fantastic portrayal of violence in terms of play and entertainment,

others believe that the younger generation must be protected from all displays of violence, especially in games, movies and television due to a potential desire to emulate it and bring harm to themselves or others. Such views are not just maintained or advocated by the older generation of parents but also by lobby group that includes also concerned teachers, social workers, psychologists. The latter professional groups can sometimes be divided on the issue and believe that children may need the symbolic articulation of violence to handle the tensions or contradictions in their social lives.

As societies affirm their social, ethnic and cultural identity as the basis of nationalism which has geographical and historical context, it may be challenging for a company to market their product for international consumers. The latter may have different social values that emphasize a more cosmopolitan outlook. Since I started working in the game company as a support representative, I found there to be a pattern in complaints about violence prior to the change. There seemed to be a tendency in these complaints being submitted from US based users' parents, informing me that it was indeed their child who played the game, and that the game contained too much graphical violence. Incidentally, games and other applications have age ratings in the digital app stores and parents can enable parental settings so as to disable the ability for their children to download certain applications. In our terms of use agreement users must be at least 12 years of age and need approval from a legal guardian to play between ages of 13 and 17. Due to practical limitations, data protection and privacy issues in the digital space it has been difficult to address proper age verifications of consumers. Since the inception of age restrictions in the digital scene, age verification has only required confirmation of an appropriate age by pressing a virtual button. In contrast to youngsters attempting to sneak into an R-rated movie, users of inappropriate age have an easier time acquiring similar rated digital games. However, as earlier discussed, gaming activities have moved into the home and family space where it is now easier for parents to monitor children's gaming activities, but it is not always so. For instance, it is my experience that Norwegian parents often do not recognize the implications of different gaming styles and consider gaming activities as a juvenile habit, that children will grow out of by the time they reach adolescence or young adulthood.





# Conclusion

This study has used ethnographic data from various gaming groups and from different perspectives including both consumers and developers, to provide analysis of both offline and online gaming activities, as well as social activities before and after play. Game details have been examined in order to grasp the significance of the events that occurs in the virtual world. I have also discussed the logic underpinning of sale and design of modern games. This has altogether been beneficial in studying contemporary gaming activities as a whole, while also shedding light on critical and recent issues.

Different gaming subcultures symbolically separate themselves from mainstream society and also other game subcultures. The “gamer” label often carries negative connotations, yet gamers have formed sub-classes within this subculture to e.g. separate between “casual” and “hardcore”, or “PC gamer” and “console gamer” that involves different set of rituals, vernacular, and symbolic status hierarchies as shown within the youth organization. Different forms of play and genres mean that the games fit in the player’s wider life in various ways, such as competitive forms of individualism in console fighting games, or team rivalries in various games involving clans or guilds. Slang words and jargon often borrowing from English (“plebs”, “good game”, “noob”, etc.) were sometimes used to commend or insult others, but also to police behavior.

Patterns in gender disparity seemed to indicate a connection between the particular games being played differing from the games most played by females. From the data gathered females seemed to be more interested in the casual aspects of gaming, which resonated with data from other anthropological work. There was also an indication towards the different ways of which males and females prioritize competing social obligations. This led to an analysis of masculinity and power relations that emerged predominantly in competitive team-based games. The toxic behavior in young male players required to be managed or redirected e.g. by the groups’ use of the aforementioned vernacular.

The use of immersive technologies has been unpacked, predominantly relating to online role-playing games. In a contemporary Norwegian context, gamers are engaged in a new form of social arena, offering ways of cultural-social experimentation with possibilities of reinventing youth identities. The game universe is sometimes used by individuals to escape both real life possibilities and sometimes responsibilities. Jakob played World of Warcraft not merely for the sake of amusement, but to immerse himself in a computer universe that transcended his physical disabilities. The different motives for playing also reveals the diverse investments that members of gaming communities have and how it underpins the growth of the virtual. Some games have incentives for the player to play for many hours, though not necessarily consecutively designed for players who can only play for short bursts in time like many casual mobile players.

Examining how the games have changed historically has revealed changes to those who engages with them. Subsequently analysis of modern mobile gaming activities using ethnographic data from consumers and industry professionals. The study provides insight from game designers' perspective into how immersive technology is used to keep the users returning. Norwegian developers are contesting the digital game market with new strategies for targeting youth audiences, at the same time often using addictive mechanisms, e.g. gambling that raises concerns. Addictive technologies in video games are not recent inventions, but certain randomized reward structures found in modern games are indistinguishable from gambling reward structures. On a national level, current legislation has not adapted to the development of technology. The Ministry of Culture is working on a new gambling law, but it is unclear if this will apply to digital games and reward mechanics such as loot boxes (Forum for spilltrender 2018).

Legitimate concerns have been articulated by parents, politicians, educators, and mass media regarding video game addiction, and what is being experienced in the virtual worlds. I believe it is then necessary – and also the purpose of this thesis – to investigate the underlying issues and understand what the games mean for different individuals: how the games fit in with other interests, activities, relationships, obligations, and forms of identification. We must understand the concept of the game itself and how the player experiences the relationships and the meanings it unfolds. If we would be clear about the nature of emergent gaming activities both offline and online, we could approach the interpretation of certain issues in modern gaming activities, such as video game addiction, at a more profound level than previously.

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