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The Social Context of LAN Gaming

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Abstract

Playing video games at a Local Area Network (LAN) has become a complex social activity. Engaging with these games requires more than simply accomplishing the games' objectives: it is also a process of socialisation within a community of gamers. Through my observation of players' activities at a Cape Town based LAN event, I begin to outline where, when and how social learning and sharing occurs at these events. I will show how playing games in a LAN setting can teach valuable interpersonal and social skills.

The first part of this thesis describes the setting in which ethnographic research is undertaken. This study uses ethnographic research in the form of an exploratory survey, participant observation and informal interviews as research tools to answer the research question: What type of social learning takes place at a LAN event.

The second part comprises the methodology section and describes ethnography, and in particular, the participant observation aspect of this approach and then details the actual research and the processes that follow.

In the third part, the situational learning approach is identified as the theoretical framework of choice. The theory's development and significant features are discussed and its relevance to the research is established.

Five main perspectives on gaming are introduced in the fourth part of the thesis. This includes the defining of what game is, the history of modern gaming, the business and popularity of gaming, the cultural and social significance of popular gaming; and the social context of gaming. These perspectives all give context to the study.

Leading from the perspectives, the research findings are discussed in context of these perspectives and within the situational learning theoretical approach.

In the conclusion, the research question is evaluated and will show how much more qualitative and quantitative research is needed to further understand this popular and growing social event.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

It's 2pm on a Saturday afternoon and Gamat¹ is busy carrying 'bökkies' (trestle stands) towards the centre of the rectangular hall. He does not ask for help or issue instructions, but three others (beside me) follow his lead, bringing chairs and table tops stacked at the back of the hall towards its centre to form two long rows of tables.

When I offer to open the blinds for more light, there are sniggers. Gamat, with a hint of sarcasm mutters: 'If you want to'. After eight tables are set up quite quickly, Gamat and his friends proceed to cover the large glass doors which led out to a sunny central quad, and expertly close the blinds I had struggled to open. The hall is transformed from an airy space into something quite cold and grey, only saved from complete darkness by the light streaming in from the entrance. I realise immediately the error of my earlier *faux pas*. This was the world of LAN gamers, where sunlight caused unwanted glare on computer screens; where dark light contrasted with millions of streaming pixels, boosted by sophisticated graphics cards to enhance the 'experience'.

I am at the LAN 'bash' to conduct ethnographic research in the form of participant observation, interviews and hand out an exploratory survey. According to my research, there are no studies of LAN gamers or a LAN event. My research was primarily focussed on observing the social setting of the LAN and the social learning that took place.

Games have been approached from a wide range of academic perspectives and methodologies. Salen and Zimmerman (2004), in their detailed exploration of game design, suggest that games may be approached with a focus on rules (the design of the game), play (the human experience of playing the game), culture (the larger contexts engaged with and inhabited by the game). To these three units, Nielson, Smith and Tosca (2008) have added ontology, to arrive at the four main perspectives:

The game: here one or more particular games are subjected to analysis. The point is to look at games in themselves and say something about their structure and how they employ certain

¹ Not his real name.

techniques.

The players: Sometimes the activity of playing games is more important than the games themselves. Studies focussing on the players usually wish to explore how players use games as a type of media or as a social space.

The culture: can choose to focus on the wider culture that games are a part of. Here, wish to understand how games and gaming interact with wider cultural patterns. For instance, may be interested in the subcultures that evolve around gaming or in the discourses surrounding gaming, looking at the public outrage when it comes to violence in games.

Ontology: Finally, some studies examine the philosophical foundations of games. These studies usually seek to present general statements that apply to all games, and may enable us to understand, for example, the relationship between rules, fiction and the play. Smith and Tosca (2008, p.10)

Nielson, Smith and Tosca (2008) identify two research communities who are conducting game research on a noteworthy scale within these fields. The first of these is called the simulation community. Researchers within this group focus on all forms of simulations, including non-electronic ones, but consistently study video games.

The second and much newer video games studies community came into being roundabout the year 2000; it represents what has become commonly known as 'game studies'. The video game studies community presently revolves around the Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA) and journals like *Game Studies* and *Games and Culture*.

Within the video game studies community, Nielson, Smith and Tosca (2008) found that two general approaches can be identified, although they acknowledge that these are not cast in stone. A *Formalist* group tends to use game analysis or ontological analysis. They represent a humanistic approach to media and focus on the works themselves or philosophical questions related to the nature or use of the works. One

subgroup prioritizes representation while the other prioritizes rules; they are sometimes referred to as the narratologists and the ludologists respectively.

The *Situationalist* group tends to focus its analysis on game players or the game culture at large. They are not interested in all broad encompassing statements that do not take context and variation into account. They search less for general patterns or laws and more for analysis and descriptions of specific events or social practises.

Taking into account the above, my research will follow a Situationalist approach and focuses on the players as well as the culture of video games.

My research question is as follows:

What type social practices and learning takes place at a LAN event?

Although there is a plethora of studies related to various aspects of game studies, Jansz and Martens (2005) is the only study I found which bears direct similarities to my research. They researched a commercial LAN gaming event which took place in the Netherlands and developed a questionnaire to gain the demographic details to answer their first question. They used the Uses and Gratifications theoretical framework to analyse the Likert Scale questions they asked participants in order to ascertain answers to their second research question regarding the motivation for attending a LAN. The general headings they developed for analysis of motivation were competition, control, entertainment, escapism, pastime and they then added another, the social context.

Jansz and Martin's (2005) research results clearly contradicted the stereotype of the 'nerdy' adolescent who games in isolation. Their sample of LAN gamers are far more socially motivated than the stereotype suggests. The gamers enjoyed playing games in each others' presence and this gratification scored the highest amongst the motives found. This is similar to my own observations with the gamers I researched. While competitive play was still a huge motivating factor, seeing old friends and 'catching up' proved to be more of a factor for getting together to LAN. Jansz and Martin's (2005) study found that actual 'face to face' presence at a LAN event was more gratifying than online gaming on the internet at home. Second, in terms of motivation was interest, where the LAN event served as a platform for exchange of

information about (new) video games and gaming practices. Third, in terms of motives was actual competitive gameplay.

As a social event, Jansz and Martens (2005) sees LAN events as having interesting parallels with older forms of game-play:

“A LAN event draws gamers out of their private houses into a public space of collective gaming, as older games invited people to play on the street and squares. A second parallel suggests itself with contemporary music culture. Enjoying music does not limit itself to the focal activity of listening, but also embraces participation in concerts, raves and parties. In the same vein, LAN events are the public instances of emerging game culture. Both parallels underline that playing video games is not necessarily a solitary activity enjoyed by an isolated adolescent.” Jansz and Martens (2005, p. 350)

Jansz & Martens (2005) acknowledges that there are limitations to their study, in that it does not cater for the overlapping of motivations. They suggest an interview technique be used, to tease out better results. I have attempted to do this in my research of the LAN event, coupled to participative observation. Ultimately, my paper's focus is on actual social practices which take place during gaming and within the social setting.

This chapter started out with my personal experience of meeting up with the gamers and establishing my outsider or 'noob' status. It progresses to a short introduction to the study of gaming and the dominant approaches to studies in this field. It then establishes my approach to the study. Thereafter, I listed my research question and related it to the only relevant study I could find on the subject matter. This then leads to the next chapter which outlines the methodology to be undertaken during the research.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Ethnography

Ethnographic techniques are part of a research tradition that has been developed by anthropologists and community-study sociologists. These methods have been found to be useful for gathering certain important kinds of data; in fact, as Wilson (1997) has pointed out, some researchers claim that these anthropological techniques may gather information about human behaviour that is impossible to obtain by the more quantitative methods.

Wilson (1997) surmises that many social scientists believe that human behaviour is significantly influenced by the settings in which it occurs. They, therefore, believe that it is necessary to study psychological events in natural settings, and that settings generate regularities in behaviour that often transcend differences among individuals. Wilson (1997) agrees with the view of ecological psychologists, who claim that if one hopes to generalize research findings to the everyday world where most human events occur, then the research must be conducted in settings similar to those that the researchers hope to generalize about, where those same forces that will one day act are not interrupted.

Wilson (1997) points out that the rationale for using an ethnographic approach, and more specifically participant observation research can be summarised in two parts:

- (a) Human behaviour is complex and influenced by the context in which it occurs. Any research plan which takes the actors out of the naturalistic setting may negate those forces and hence obscure its own understanding;
- (b) Human behaviour often has more meaning than its observable "facts". A researcher seeking to understand behaviour must find ways to learn the manifest and latent meanings for the participants, and must also understand the behaviour from the objective outside perspective. The research seeks to discover what these meaning structures are, how they develop, and how they influence behaviour, in as comprehensive and objective a fashion as possible. (Wilson 1997. p.253)

Using an ethnographic approach allows us to understand how media and technology are meaningful to people in the context of their everyday lives. Ito (2010) does not see media or technology as determining or impacting society, culture, or individuals as an external force with its own internal logic, but rather as embodiments of social and cultural relationships that in turn shape and structure our possibilities for social action and cultural expression. It follows that we do not see the content of the media or the media platform (TV, books, games, etc.) as the most important variables for determining social or cognitive outcomes. The strength of this approach is that it allows us to lift, from the empirical material, what the important categories and structures are that determine gaming practise. The empirical material in this case consisted of a broadly themed questionnaire handed out at the LAN gaming event. In addition, I acted as a participant observer at the event, taking notes, and absorbing as much as possible.

Although I intended to conduct informal interviews at the event, this did not transpire as I determined from the 'mood' of the players that they were not really keen on sitting down and conversing, especially after completing a questionnaire. Rather, they had come to play games and socialise with friends and partake in light-hearted banter. I decided to rather be a 'fly on the wall', listening in on conversations, which proved to be useful as it did not seem that any inhibitions shown by the participants and useful information and observation was picked up in this manner.

After the event, the survey data was coded and results were drawn up.

Setting, Entry and Establishment of Researcher Role

The LAN event took place at the Athlone Methodist crèche. The suburb of Athlone lies approximately 9 km West of Cape Town International Airport. It forms part of the historical Cape Flats, which derives its name from the flat, sandy stretch of land located in the outskirts of Cape Town Central.

My 'in' was Gamat, a family member and one of the chief organisers of these LAN sessions, or, as they put it 'bashes'. Gamat was my supplier of movies, TV series, music, and weird and wonderful UTube clips, downloaded and shared amongst his network of friends and family.

When I had approached him with the idea of doing research about gaming at the LAN, I was very enthusiastic, emphasizing what I saw at the uniqueness of what they were doing. He was immediately quite positive and sent out an email on the 14th of

July 2010 to those invited to the LAN:

“...check here.. Rushdi is doing research for his doctorate/masters?!?!?
It's to do with file sharing bring people together, etc... interviewed me (well asked me questions) and he said that our LANs (aka BASHES) like none other... don't actually realise what have... a winning formula... a non profit event, bring people of all racist/ religion together, a social sharing event, has grown from when it was started, kept people in contact, kept gaming alive, rivalry, passing on the BASH onto newer generations, etc... It actually got me thinking... this is amazing what have... it's a pleasure helping to host/organize bashes... and I will continue for as long as I can... but I'm going to try and get more people involved to continue the bashes... anywayz [sic]... Rushdi will be there probably asking you guys questions and stuff as part of the research... its anonymous so don't me affraid... imagine it wasn't... the RIAA² will come through the windows with smoke bombs/night vision glasses and what
what... looking for dSm...lol...

PS - remember this is a farewell to Bogard lan as well... so just stiek uit [sic] to wish the bra [sic] well in Japan, I'm sure he will appreciate it.. but please don't cry like a little biatch [sic] Jonathan.” Gamat, (2010)

The gushing endorsement notwithstanding, the email hinted at some of the broad themes I wanted to explore through my research: that those immersed in gaming are engaged in an exploration of language, social interaction, and activity that leads to diverse forms of learning and sharing. This learning and sharing ultimately had a significant effect on these gamers' lives and their interaction with those outside of gaming.

At a LAN, gamers get together in a house, or in this case a crèche hall, and link their

² RIAA stands for the Recording Industry Association of America and is a group which represents the recording industry distributors in the United States. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Riaa

PCs in order to play together. PCs are carefully brought from home as well as game consoles and monitors; all of these can be networked. The core members of this particular group had been playing on various gaming platforms from a young age, including early Nintendo hand-held devices (Donkey Kong spring to mind) as well as early game consoles such as Atari. Most of the participants are now married and some have children of their own. In the questionnaire I handed out, one of the questions asked was 'In which year did you play your first LAN?'. It was both interesting and amusing to watch the older players trying to work out when they had done this, often checking with each other, asking if the LAN they had attended at 'such and such' a place was the first one, and they then struggled to link that to a year. The actual data would suggest the players had been attending LANs for more than 10 years, with the most experienced gamer stating that he had attended his first LAN 13 years ago. Once the PCs and consoles are set up and networked, gamers broke up into 'clans' or teams and start warring with each other. The game of choice for the majority of gamers at this LAN was a Microsoft Xbox console game called *Call of Duty* (2007), a 'first person shooter' game which can be described as ultra-violent. Participants took particular pleasure in sneaking up on an opposition player and using a chainsaw to dismember him. This action came complete with gruesome chainsaw sound effects and visual effects which had your victim sliced in two, entrails sliding off the chainsaw. It must be stated that the participants did not all play the same game all of the time. Some participants played other games and some used the opportunity to share various forms of data. However, most participants did partake in gaming for quite a significant part of the session.

It would be prudent to mention that this was a 'not for profit' LAN and not a commercial LAN. By commercial, I mean that an entrance fee is charged and individual and clan winners can earn prizes. One of the better known commercial LAN's in the Cape Town area is called the 'OC', which takes place at the Bellville Velodrome on the last weekend of every month, attracting 800 or more entrants excluding those who just come to hang out. As stated, the LAN event I researched was not a commercial event, although those who attend were expected to make a donation to cover the cost of hiring the hall and any other small expenses.

Participants

The survey and participant observation field research for this was carried out in July 2010 during a LAN bash of a group of committed gamers. 30 Participants took part in the LAN, gathering to play their favourite games and socialise with friends. The participants were exclusively male.

There were four children who attended the LAN. They were the offspring of a few of the players. Their ages ranged between seven and ten years of age.

Procedure

Individual participants were approached with the request to contribute to my research by completing the questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed at some point during the LAN bash and I took care to do so when the participants were relaxing after playing a few games. No one refused to contribute, although 2 questionnaires were half-completed and not used in the survey. Most participants were quite helpful and interested in the research. One participant, after completing the questionnaire engaged me in conversation and encouraged me come to another LAN event where he would ensure his 'clan' members would fill out the questionnaire. The canvassing took place on one evening due to the *ad hoc* nature of the event itself. Our sample reflected the obvious unequal gender distribution as there were no females present. It took the participants, on average, about 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Measures

The questionnaire consisted firstly of a set of 42 forced questions which dealt primarily with demographics, access use of technology, their first LAN experience, game frequency, and what their favourite game was. It asked social context questions as such as enquiring if they had brought a friend to a LAN, or if they had met new friends through the LAN. Lastly, there were questions dealing with the sharing of data at the LAN. I wanted to find out who they shared the data gathered at the LAN with, and who comprised this 'sharing circle'.

There was a short section of 11 scaled questions intended to understand gaming motives. These questions dealt with competition and gameplay. Participants were

asked to express whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (ticking their preference).

Participative observation

Participative observation commenced from the beginning of the LAN session, which started at 2pm on a Saturday to 12:30am on the Sunday. It helped that I knew quite a few of the participants and they knew why I was there. It also helped that I had fleetingly attended a few LANs in the past: I was therefore a 'familiar' face. Field notes were taken as well as digital photographs. I also utilised an additional sound recorder which was switched on during informal conversations and gameplay. This was not concealed from participants. I refrained from actual gameplay and was quite content to observe the gamers at play and in their social setting.

Online questions

Once the survey data was collated and field notes and reflections of the participant observation was taken into account, further questions arose. These questions were sent to an email list of participants of the LAN as well as those who could not attend the LAN. There were general questions evolving from the data which were open-ended in their interpretive value. Once I received responses, I would either answer to the group or engage directly with the person who responded, in order to tease out further meaning.

To conclude, this section outlines the methodology undertaken during the research. It begins with an explanation of how the ethnographic approach is an appropriate methodology for this study. This is followed by a step-by-step breakdown of the research using ethnographic conventions. Having gathered all the information and data it would now be prudent to explain the theoretical framework which will be used to give context and meaning to this material.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

I will use Situated Learning theory as my theoretical framework. Situated Learning theory posits that learning is an act of social participation in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991).

This framework was developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. According to Smith (2009), much of Lave's work has focused on the 're-conceiving' of learning, learners, and educational institutions in terms of social practice. When looking closely at everyday activity, she argued it was clear that 'learning is ubiquitous, an ongoing activity, though often unrecognized as such' (Lave 1993, p5).

Etienne Wenger is an educator and holds a Ph.D. in artificial intelligence from the University of California at Irvine.

Their analysis was first published in *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* (1991) and later augmented in works by Jean Lave (1993) and Etienne Wenger (1999; 2002).

Lave & Wenger (1991) developed their theory by providing an analysis of situated learning in five different settings: Yucatec midwives, native tailors, navy quartermasters, meat cutters and alcoholics. In all cases, there was a gradual acquisition of knowledge and skills as novices learned from experts in the context of everyday activities.

I will argue that the same type of learning takes place within the LAN context. From learning how to network games and actual gameplay, 'noobs' (new the group with no status) could become one who 'owned' (full member and having status).

Smith (2009) surmises that by shifting the focus away from the individual and to the broader network of social relationships, situated learning theory suggests that the relationships of 'knowledge sharing, mentoring, and monitoring within social groups become key sites of analytic interest'. Thus, people learn in all possible contexts of activity, because they are part of shared cultural systems and are engaged in collective social action.

The basic argument made by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger is that 'communities of practice', a term they coined, are ubiquitous and that we are all constantly engaged in a number of them - at our place of employment, schools, home, or in our civic and leisure pursuits.

Etienne Wenger was later to write:

"Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell: Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." Wenger circa (2007) as cited in Smith (2009)

The dynamics of the groups vary: in some groups there are those members who are at the centre, while in other groups, these same main members are more at the periphery.

As human beings, we are constantly engaged in the pursuit of activities of all kinds, from ensuring our physical survival to seeking pleasures. As we define these activities and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world and tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly. Over time, the collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our activities and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore to call these kinds of communities - communities of practice (Wenger 1998, p45).

Although these organisations differ in various ways, members are brought together by partaking in common activities and by 'what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities' (Wenger 1998). In this respect, a community of practice is different from a community of interest or a geographical community in

that it involves a shared practice.

According to Etienne Wenger (c 2007), three elements are crucial in distinguishing a community of practice from other groups and communities:

The domain. A community of practice is something more than a club of friends or a network of connections between people. 'It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people' (op. cit.).

The community. 'In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other' (op. cit.).

The practice. 'Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction' (op. cit.).

A community of practice is thus much more than the technical knowledge or particular skills with which to complete a task. Participants are involved in a set of relationships over time (Lave and Wenger 1991, p98) and communities develop around things that matter to people (Wenger 1998). This helps members identify a sense of joint enterprise and identity. For a community of practice to function it needs to generate and appropriate a 'shared repertoire of ideas, commitments and memories'. It also needs to develop various resources such as tools, documents, routines, vocabulary and symbols that in some way carry the accumulated knowledge of the community. The interactions involved, and the ability to undertake larger or more complex activities and projects through cooperation, bind people together and help to facilitate relationship and trust.

Rather than looking to learning as the acquisition of certain forms of knowledge, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger have tried to place it in social relationships – situations of co-participation. As William F. Hanks puts it in his introduction to their book: 'Rather than asking what kind of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved,

they ask what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place' (1991, p.14). It not so much that learners acquire structures or models to understand the world, but they participate in frameworks that have structure.

As the beginner or newcomer moves from the periphery of this community to its centre, they become more active and engaged within the culture and hence assume the role of expert or old-timer. Furthermore, situated learning is usually unintentional rather than deliberate. These ideas are what Lave & Wenger (1991) call the process of 'legitimate peripheral participation'.

Other researchers have further developed the theory of situated learning specifically in the field of education. Brown, Collins & Duguid (1989) emphasize the idea of cognitive apprenticeship: 'Cognitive apprenticeship supports learning in a domain by enabling students to acquire, develop and use cognitive tools in authentic domain activity. Learning, both outside and inside school, advances through collaborative social interaction and the social construction of knowledge'.

This section outlines the situated theoretical approach which will underpin the findings of this study. The historical context was discussed and key concepts such as 'domain', 'community of practise' and the 'practise' were explained.

It becomes clear that the knowledge sharing within this group of LAN gamers, the culture of friendship and mentoring, are key areas of social learning as outcomes of situated learning theory. The gamers learn through their activity, because they are part of shared cultural system and engaged in collective social interaction. Having established a strong theoretical base, I now move onto giving dominant perspectives on gaming.

Chapter 4: What is a Game?

One of the earliest philosophers who attempted to understand games was German Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). In his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953/1967), Wittgenstein argued that there was no common feature of the objects that call games, and that could hope for nothing more than 'family resemblances'. Wittgenstein (1953/1967) looked at a number of activities traditionally referred to as games, including chess, tennis, and ring-around-the-roses. While some of these have required luck and others required skill, he notes that 'see a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing, sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of details'. According to Wittgenstein's (1953/1967) definition of family resemblances, while Game A shares features with Game B and Game B shares features with Game C, Game A and Game C need not share any features. It has to be noted that Wittgenstein was not trying to find a common feature of games; he did not use many game examples. It is therefore difficult to use his definition for all games. It is also important to note that Wittgenstein did not distinguish between formal games such as chess and informal children's games, due primarily to there being no distinction between the two in the German language. This idea of play has been used extensively by game studies students as a base theory from which to grapple with the complexity of digital games.

Kerr (2006) identifies three key play theorists whose work is referenced widely by ludologists:

Johan Huizinga; a Dutch academic, in *Homo Ludens* (1949), reevaluates the status of play that has historically treated it as inferior to work and other 'serious' activities. He asserts that play existed prior to culture and goes on to describe many types of play in society. He defines play as a 'voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding' (1949, p28). He introduced the important concept of the 'magic circle' which separates the game from the outside world. Playing a game in this view, means setting oneself apart from the outside world, and surrendering to a system that has no effect on anything which lies beyond the circle. So for instance, if you play a game of snakes and ladders, you are submitting to a formally defined experience with rules that are clearly distinct from those that follow outside this

special activity. The game rules make sense in themselves and are only important within their particular context. Thus arguably, the snakes and ladders player constructs a magic circle to engage in an activity cut off from the outside world.

While these ideas have merit, the most obvious problem with this concept is that playing a game does have real world consequences such as the time expended on playing as opposed to doing something else. Games can also affect our moods by making us feel thrilled at defeating the evil enemy or enraged at not being able to complete a simple task.

A second key play theorist is French philosopher Roger Caillois. He has articulated a more specific vision of the nature of games than Huizinga's 'magic circle'. For Caillois games have six formal qualities: freedom, separateness (in time and space from events outside), rules, uncertainty of outcome, non-productiveness and make believe Caillois (2001, pp 9 -10). He also divided games into four categories, according to their dominant features: The categories are *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance) *mimicry* (imitation), and *Ilinx* (vertigo). Within *Agon* competition is central and skill determines whether the player is successful or not. This includes hide and seek, chess, physical sports, and most video games within the action genre.

In *Alea*, chance is the most important parameter for the play experience. Chance decides who wins a lottery or a dice game. Most video games have an element of chance and randomness, although some classic adventure games are entirely linear. Mimicry (imitation): the play experience centres on being someone else, the ability to take on the role of a fighter pilot for instance. Winning is usually not an important part of this play form which is often found in traditional role-playing games and adventure video games. Ilinx (vertigo) this play form offers the chance to experience a pleasurable sensation, often through physical activities like riding a roller coaster or carousels. In video games, it is found most vividly in racing games like *Grand Theft Auto*. One could also argue that the Nintendo Wii games would fall in this category.

These features can be combined to form multi-faceted play forms such as *mimicry-agon-ilinx*. These different categories of play can be further analysed on the spectrum between *paidia* and *ludus*. In a *paidia* activity, one is not bound by rigid rules. *Ludus*, by contrast, refers to systems with formalized rules like chess, soccer or backgammon. Although winning or losing is not anathema to *paidia*, these goals are not always present; who wins is much more a matter of negotiation between

players than something decided by specific rules.

Nielsen, Smith and Tosca (2008) argues that while this is an appealing structure of game types, it can be rather arbitrary and does not always help distinguish between individual games. Take for instance, the soccer game *FIFA 2004*. The game is competitive, has elements of chance and simulates a sport, thus placing it in three of Caillois's four categories. Caillois (2001) claim that 'sports in general' belong solely to *agon* does not seem enlightening in relation to video games.

Leading game studies scholar, Jesper Juul, does not find Caillois' categories very useful in describing video games:

“Although it is commonly used, I find Caillois categorisation to be extraordinarily problematic. The individual categories can in many cases be useful, but their selection and the distinction between them are very hard to justify: while the distinction between *paidia* and *ludus* is more or less correct on a formal level, the idea that they would be opposite ends of a spectrum on an experiential level stems from the misunderstanding that rules are strictly limitations, and that the player can do nothing more complex than what the rules explicitly specify.”
Juul (2003a)

This criticism is further justified if we look at the game *SimCity* (1989), which can be seen to encourage free-form play over strict adherence to rules and single-minded attempts to fulfil game goals.

The final major play theorist we will examine is Brian Sutton-Smith. Nielsen, Smith and Tosca (2008) believe that educationalist Brian Sutton-Smith has been a significant force in establishing games and play as a legitimate area of research through papers, anthologies, and conferences. Sutton-Smith (1971) stresses the multi-faceted nature of games, noting that 'a game is what decide it should be; that our definition will have an arbitrary character depending on our purpose (1971, p.7) According to Sutton-Smith (1971), the variety and widespread presence of games in many cultures should not be interpreted as proof that games are inevitably a part of every culture. Rather, games emerge as societies mature and develop more advanced political and social organisations.

According to Nielsen, Smith and Tosca (2008), and Sutton-Smith (1971), games are seen as a 'finite, fixed and goal orientated'. He defines games as an exercise of 'voluntary control systems in which there is an opposition between forces, confined by a procedure and rules in order to produce a disequilibrium outcome'. This definition is quite broad, but it is necessary given the multi-faceted nature of games. Games come in very different forms ranging from social games, to solitary games, physical games, and theoretical games.

The ludologists built on some these theories and emerged during the 1990s. These writers assert that there is a need for new theories and models to be developed if we are to understand what is unique about digital games as interactive texts. Espen Aarseth attempted to develop his own models of particular texts rather than import or adopt pre-existing models. He argues that theorists need to study the 'game-world-labyrinth' dimension of cybertexts (1997. p5) and more recently that 'any game consists of three aspects: (1) rules, (2) a material/ semiotic system (a gameworld) and (3) gameplay (the events resulting from the application of the rules of the gameworld)' (2004. pp47-48). Gonzalo Frasca draws upon Roger Callois' concepts of *paidia* and *ludus* to argue that cybertexts and video games should be analysed as games (1999) and for a move away from representation towards simulation semiotics (2003. 223). For Frasca (2003) the fact that games simulate and model behaviours rather than represent them is key. Marku Eskelinen (2004) contends that two key aspects of digital games make them as different from traditional narratives (i) the time scheme/ causality of events and (ii) the nature and role of the character/user. He states the 'dominant temporal relation is one between the user and event time, and not the narrative one between story time and discourse time'. (2004, p37). Jesper Juul (1999) argues that digital games are more game than story and this is its strength. For him difficulties in translating a narrative from a film or novel into a game implies that narrative features are less important in digital games than gamelike features.

Stuart Moulthrop (2004, p60) sees the shift from narrative to ludic engagement with texts and from interpretation to configuration 'as symptomatic of wider shifts in society and in our relationship to information systems'. While video games come in many types or genres, and can be defined in various ways but all varieties share one fundamental defining characteristic: games are an interactive kind of mediated entertainment. Computer games are by their very nature interactive and when

analysing a computer game one cannot have recourse solely to its textual characteristics; you have to pay particular attention to the moment it is played, the actual process of gameplay, what happens in the game by some motor action via an interface. Originally a text was said to be 'interactive' when an individual could directly intervene in and change the images and text that he or she sees. So the audiences for new media become 'users' rather than viewers of visual culture, film and TV, or readers of literature. The accordances of interactivity are celebrated by techno-enthusiasts as offering whole new worlds of media experience and are debated at length by textual theorists, media sociologists and human computer interface designers (Lister et al, 2003,19-30, 40-44 cited in Dovey and Kennedy 2006). Dovey and Kennedy (2006) take the view that games are different to traditional media such as film and literature as the user is allowed intervention into the game 'text' to make it look and sound different – an understanding of interactivity derived from the history of human computer design. Here interactivity was seen as a way of controlling computing processes whilst they were continuing. (Jensen 1999).

Another key distinguishing term is that of 'configuration' within the video game. Dovey and Kennedy (2006). This makes a distinction between 'push button' interactivity and the productive processes of gameplay. Configuration is a term that derives from within the study of Human Computer Interaction – and has emerged in the work of Aarseth (2001) and Eskelinen (2001) and more recently Moulthrop (2004), to describe the complexity of the active processes of both interpretation and interaction as the player literally constructs the game 'on the fly' through the practices of gameplay. Moulthrop (2004) further notes that this configuration is not only an aspect of digital games but can be applied to other new media like blogs, websites and email.

While Huizinga and Caillois agree that games are entirely separate from the outside world, Canadian Media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964), sees games as a reflection of culture, and claims that a culture's most popular games can even reveal its core values. Therefore, an account on gaming such as Kline et al's (2003) which stressed the role of corporate initiatives, militarism and masculinity would be seen as a socially determined view.

The other view, perhaps a more obvious view, would be to say that technology leads to the creation of the game. In this sense, reference to hardware changes, bit and

chip technology upgrades and software enhancements explaining changes in games solely by reference to increasing chip capacities would be a technologically determinist account of games.

Dovey & Kennedy (2006) sees the opposition and tension between these two positions has deep roots in different philosophies and profound implications for the way understand relationships between media technologies, culture and society.

Williams (1990) advanced a model of technological development that, although fluid, and emphasizing the possibility for very many different outcomes, was essentially driven by what he called 'social investment' and 'social need'. The former provided through the state or capital and the latter deriving from the communications needs and desires of a society at a given point in its history. McLuhan, in contrast, argued that technologies are the medium in which exist, that human cultures emerge through are shaped by technology. In his account, the importance of media technologies is not in their particular use, the 'message', but in the structured way that it changes the 'pace and scale' of human affairs.

Dovey & Kennedy (2006) see Williams as a counter to the 'hyperbolic enthusiasms of digital technophiles' who constantly tell us how far computers are going to transform society. A Luddist approach that sees technology as inherently bad is also undermined in this approach. However, a McLuhanite might argue that the contemporary 'networked society' (Castells, 1996), would not be possible without the technologies of computing. Here digital technologies themselves are understood to exert powerful agency in so far as our whole relationship with the external world is now heavily mediated. Technology has become our environment, and environmental factors obviously play a major role in producing consciousness and identity. (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006, p4).

McLuhan loosely defines games:

"Games are popular art, collective, social reactions to the main drive or action of any culture. Games, like institutions, are extensions of social man and of the body politic, as technologies are extensions of the animal organism. Both games and technologies are counter-irritants or ways of adjusting to the stress that occur in any social group...Games are dramatic models of our psychological lives

providing release of particular tensions.” McLuhan (1964, pp. 208-209)

Here McLuhan makes two claims: the first is that game forms are tied to the culture in which they exist, and thus reveal its nature; the second is that games release tension. While there may be some general truth to the first claim, the second claim does not really hold up as playing games can quite clearly provoke feelings of anger and frustration.

An influential cultural view of the nature of video games has been presented by Henry Jenkins. Jenkins (2005) argued that video games are a new form of popular art and game designers are the artists of our century. His work is inspired by American cultural critic Gilbert Seldes, whose focus on popular aesthetics as found in forms such as jazz, the comic strip and Hollywood cinema instead of the ‘great arts’ was rather revolutionary in the mid-twentieth century.

For Seldes, the ‘lively arts’ are mainly kinetic, that is, they seek to move people emotionally rather than to appeal to the intellect as the classical arts do. Popular artists, Jenkins explore new directions and new media:

“Cinema and other popular arts were to be celebrated, Seldes insisted, because they were so deeply imbedded in everyday life, because they were democratic arts embraced by average citizens. Through streamlined styling and syncopated rhythms, they captured the vitality of contemporary urban experience.” Jenkins (2005)

For Jenkins, video games are the worthy heirs of this trend:

“Games represent the new lively art, one as appropriate for the digital age as those earlier media were for the machine age. They open up new aesthetic experiences and transform the computer screen into a realm of experimentation and innovation that is broadly accessible.” Jenkins (2005)

Jenkins reminds us that a lot of the social prejudice levelled against games today has clear parallels to the reactions against the cinema in Seldes’ time, like the vitriolic backlash levelled against the depiction of violence and sex. He argues that games

are an artform still in its infancy, but some games with advanced aesthetics already suggest that the form can provoke strong emotions. Video games have also already given us such memorable characters such as *Sonic the Hedgehog* and *Super Mario Bros, Mario and Luigi*. For Jenkins (2005), games are about player control, and the best experiences arise when players perceive that their intervention has spectacular influence on the game, such as when a *Defense of the Ancients*, (2005) player understands that her carefully planned strategy ensured her narrow but crucial victory over a warring neighbour nation.

Jenkin's (2005) talks of play as a performance, where a person's interaction with a game facilitates a kind of immersion unknown to other media. In order to facilitate a player's sense of extreme control over the game he is in – vital to Jenkin's (2005) vision of a successful game – the design and aesthetics of the game is crucial. Even more than cinema, games makes use of 'expressive amplification' a process in which the impact of specific actions is exaggerated so that the player feels increased pleasure at executing these actions. In Jenkin's (2005) view, the artistic potential of video games will be met when designers concentrate on exploring the aesthetics of action instead of trying to imitate other media.

Thinkers like Huizinga and McLuhan, as well and many others, have used games primarily in the pursuit of other questions, and are not solely concerned with creating a formal definition of a game. Others however, have tried to define games in their own right.

The first writer to seriously and systematically address such issues was game designer Chris Crawford. In 1982, he published *The Art of Computer Game Design*, and exploration of how to understand games and their relation to players. Crawford's book boldly attempted to 'address the fundamental aspects of video games to achieve a conclusion that will withstand the ravages of time and change'. Crawford (1982) does not offer any one-line definition but rather names four features that are common to all video games: representation, interaction, conflict, and safety.

Representation refers to games being about something else; or as he writes, a game 'subjectively represents a subset of reality'. Games model external situations – a baseball game, for example – but they are not actually part of these situations. Crawford stresses how most

games, in fact, do not attempt to be truly faithful simulations, hence their representation is subjective.

Interaction allows the player to influence the world of the game and get meaningful responses to his actions, so that he feels engaged with the game.

Conflict is the idea that the game has a goal that is blocked by obstacles, whether human or electronic. Conflict can be 'direct or indirect, violent or non violent, but it is always present in every game'.

Safety refers to the fact that conflicts in a game do not carry the same consequences as those same conflicts in the real world. For instance losing battle may be humiliating but there is no physical damage to you or your property.

Twenty years later the question of game definition was taken up again by game scholars. Two definitions stand out:

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004) suggested that:

"A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome."

Media theorist Jesper Juuls, (2005) after analysing many different definitions throughout the ages contended that:

"A game is a rule based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable."

While the Salen and Zimmerman definition is certainly short, it does allude to the notion of the magic circle with its reference to 'artificial conflict' which seems to suggest games are not in the 'real' world.

For our own definition of video games we can use Fransca (2003) as it represents a

practical understanding: A game is thus:

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

This section broadly touched on the way philosophers and theorists have approached the subject of defining and understanding games. It is important to provide formal definitions as they help us refine our thinking on what constitutes a game. We can therefore clarify whether the conclusions we reach are unique to games or perhaps apply to other media as well. This chapter, while broad in its scope, is certainly not all encompassing, as the nature of games and gaming is a rapidly evolving area of interest. Although one might think it arbitrary to have an entire chapter devoted to philosophical musings and definitions, perhaps the continued interest in all aspects and branches of gaming study has a much more basic drive, making money, which is discussed in the next chapter.

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Chapter 5: The Business of Gaming

Playing games on a personal computer (PC) and game consoles such as Microsoft Xbox, Sony Playstation and the Nintendo Wii; can be considered relatively new, but there is no doubt that its appeal is massive and global. It occupies a cultural niche competing most directly with the movie and music industries for the consumer's time and money. The game industry has become such an industry on its own in a short space of time that it can seriously be considered a competitor to the movie industry. Poole (2000) has indicated that in the United Kingdom the market of video games grosses more than cinema box office receipts. The influence of gaming on the movie industry has extended to massively popular games such as *Tomb Raider* (1996) and *Resident Evil* (2005) being made into mainstream movies. Gaming has also influenced movies on a more structural level. The recent release of Chris Nolan's *Inception* (2010) has been hailed by game reviewers for paying homage to gaming culture and experience. They relate the overall structure of the movie to that of a puzzle game, where the dream states in the movies are similar to levels in a game. As one anonymous online reviewer put it: 'Any modern gamer will recognize Ariadne's (central character) dream-shaping experiments as the things they've done re-shaping levels in games they've played. What seems so unreal to some *Inception* viewers will seem so real to those in the audience who have played games. They will nod and think, yes, this is part of the fun I've been having while wide awake'.

It has to be noted that cross-industry comparisons are often unfair since business models differ somewhat. For instance, movie business profits are comprised of box office earnings, DVD sales, rental licences and sales to television broadcasters while the music industry has secondary income such as licensing for use in commercials and movies. The video game industry essentially makes money by selling directly to consumers (through retail outlets or by downloads) and by subscription fees for online games. There are a few sources of secondary income although movies are occasionally based on game licences. Of course, these examples are based on "software" (i.e. games, music, movies) and if were to include hardware sales (games consoles. DVD and CD and MP3 players, etc.) the picture would become even more complicated.

According to data compiled by the NPD Group, a global market research company,

and released by the Electronic Software Association, [ESA] in January 2009, computer and video game companies posted records sales globally in 2008. The industry sold 297.6 million units, leading to an astounding \$11.7 billion in revenue. Of these sales, game console software sales totalled \$8.9 billion with 189.0 million units sold and computer games sales were \$701.4 million with 29.1 million units sold.³ Despite the recession in the United States an Economists Incorporated study released by the ESA in November 2007 found:

- Growth – From 2003 to 2006, the entertainment software industry's annual growth rate exceeded 17 percent. Over the same period, the entire U.S. economy grew at a less than four percent rate.
- GDP – In 2006, the entertainment software industry's value added to U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was \$3.8 billion. The industry also makes a disproportionate contribution to the real growth of the nation as whole. For example, in 2005-06 the industry's contribution to real growth exceeded its share of GDP by more than four to one.
- Employment – The entertainment software industry also continues to grow as a source of employment. For the four-year period 2002-06, direct employment for the industry grew at an annual rate of 4.4 percent. Currently, computer and video game companies directly and indirectly employ more than 80,000 people in 31 states. By 2009, it is projected that the industry will support over a quarter of a million American jobs. The average salary for direct employees is \$92,300, resulting in total national compensation of \$2.2 billion.⁴

In South Africa, it has proved rather difficult to obtain reliable figures regarding the growth of the gaming industry. However, Core Gaming, distributors of Nintendo in South Africa posted lifetime sales in October 2008 of the current generation consoles in South Africa. The Xbox 360, launched in October 2006 had lifetime sales at 72 000, the PlayStation 3 has recorded lifetime sales of 45 500 since its launch in March 2007. The Wii, launched here in October 2007, had racked up lifetime sales of 58 000 to date.⁵ While South Africa is but a pin prick in the global sales arena, these figures do give an indication that there is a growing market for gaming.

³ <http://www.theesa.com/facts/salesandgenre.asp> - 1 August 2010

⁴ <http://www.theesa.com/facts/econdata.asp> - 1 August 2010

⁵ http://www.el33tonline.com/past/2008/11/10/core_gaming_soars_in_sa/, 1 August 2010

For Kline et al (2003, p13), this growth of the '[t]he video and computer game industry exemplifies the globalizing, trans-national logic of twenty-first-century capital'. Although most gaming companies were founded in North America, many of its major corporate contenders are Japanese companies – Nintendo, Sega, and Sony. Kline et al's (2003) research shows that the market for interactive games is today almost equally divided between North America, Europe and, Japan. Although the bulk of industry revenues come from these heavyweights of traditional capital, games are now disseminated all around the world with gaming networks beginning to link contestants across continents. (Kline et al, 2003).

Despite the entrepreneurial beginning of games, video games are not typically made in someone's dingy little room. They are made by highly trained, smart men and women – working in large corporations with production structures well in place. Since the 90's, the industry has consolidated and evolved more standardized and professional structures for developing new products. More powerful hardware and a continuous arms race between game developers have resulted in larger production teams, increased development costs, and tougher competition.

Nielsen, Smith and Tosca (2008) point out that large scale commercial games are often referred to as 'AAA titles' and it is not unusual for such a game to involve 100 or more specialised experts, each focussing on different aspects of sound, programming, animation, graphics, marketing, game design, and production.

Nielsen, Smith and Tosca (2008) breaks down the mainstream industry as presently comprised of the following elements: hardware manufacturer, game developer, publisher, distributor, retail and consumer. The hardware manufacturer makes the console, or a component necessary to play the game. The game developer makes the game. Small developers usually need a separate publisher and distributor (similar to the book business), while big companies perform all these functions in-house. The games are then stored by distributors in their warehouses, before being sold to retailers such as Musica who in turn sells them onto us, the consumers.

To conclude, gaming is a big enterprise and is growing exponentially, relative to other media. It supports a large body of creative and technical people. Budgets are big, teams of developers are big and there are huge marketing budgets spent on getting consumers to buy games and add-on items. In order to better understand how gaming became this huge industry, the next chapter deals with the historical evolution of gaming.

Chapter 6: Historical Perspective on Gaming

Kline et al (2003) has pointed out that Raymond Williams, one of the early thinkers on mass media, saw historical perspective as vital to critical understanding. Williams believed that it is impossible to diagnose the 'cultural impact of a new medium until the specific institutional circumstances of its development are understood'. For Williams, historical perspective does not allow us to isolate a media 'text' - video games – from its grounding in specific 'material conditions and human practices'. It is thus useful to follow William's suggestion and examine the character of the various practises that produce the text in the first place, while keeping our eye on the wider social 'conditions of a practice'.

As the survey indicated, these players had been playing some form of video or PC game for more than 20 years and attending LAN gaming event for 10 years, coinciding with the rapid development of the gaming industry globally. When I engaged with one participant at the LAN, playing *Streetfighter IV* (2008) on Microsoft Xbox, he referred to himself as 'an old school gamer,' which I interpreted as someone who had lived through the evolution of gaming, and was quite happy to play and derive pleasure from the 'old school' game he was playing at the time. These gamers had grown up when the gaming industry was taking shape in a short space of time, and therefore had a unique perspective and historical insight as they grew up as active participants and consumers of evolutionary gaming products.

In this section, I rely heavily on the work of Kline et al (2003), who provides a general overview of the history of gaming as he traces the interplay of three circuits of interactive gaming – technology, culture and marketing – within the wider context of the competitive and expansionary dynamics of the post- Fordist global cultural marketplace.

Kline et al (2003) sees the invention of the first rudimentary game 'Spacewar' in the 1960's as: "the outcome of a conjuncture of military-industrial funding, hacker experimentation, and science fiction subcultures." He plots the various parts of the early gaming puzzle, such as hardware and software development, and the strong links with arcade systems. For Shahied (2010), the early arcade games still have a powerful influence on shaping his gaming experiences:

“As far as social gaming goes nothing would beat the arcade machine at the local shops. This is where respect was earned/ lost depending on how well you played while the loafers would hang around and watch. When StreetFighter II was introduced was when real reputations were forged. Now it was a 1 on 1 battle for bragging rights (and the exposure of the cowards that used patterns for advantage - b1tches [sic])” Shahied (2010)

The first real successful real gaming console company was Atari. Atari was started by Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney from a \$250 investment in 1972. It was a pioneer in arcade games, home video game consoles, and home computers. The company's products, such as Pong and the Atari 2600, helped define the computer entertainment industry from the 1970s to the mid 1980s. My first real gaming experience was with an Atari game console, which was plugged into a television set and played with joysticks. The most popular game was PacMan which I eventually ‘clocked.’⁶In an email interview, Affirmatification [(game handle name) (2010)] remembered the importance of Atari during family outings:

“Yor! ATARI changed my life. I used to sit, lay for hours... Thought I was pretty good at Space Invaders. And wherever the family outings took us, the big BAG filled with Atari Console and Games, would tag along LOL. Had to always wait till everyone was asleep to play games... (only one TV). Dark living room with flashing bright colours LOL. Sound from TV set to very low, as to not wake anybody.” Affirmatification (2010)

Interestingly, Maan (2010) likened his experiences to sport:

“Gaming started back in the day with Atari times... progressing to the next level, the challenge, achievements and bragging rights... it kinda stuck there... always ready for a challenge...practicing to rip you opponent apart.. like sports...” Maan (2010)

Kline et al (2003) then sees the rise of Nintendo as another milestone in that it “revived the digital play business, rationalising design, marketing and intellectual property practises.” This gave rise to the what was then termed the ‘Nintendo

⁶ To clock a game is to get to the highest score possible or defeat the big boss. To clock Pacman you had to get to a certain score and then it went back to 0.

generation', familiar with digital play was the consequence not only of technological advances and consummate artistry in game design but also of an ensemble of marketing practises copied from earlier generations of mass media. Nintendo's intervention in the United States market established a transpacific flow of game culture and technology that made the industry an example of corporate globalisation.

The 1980's also saw the success of the PC gaming platforms such as Commodore 64. Shahied (2010) fondly remembers this platform:

"...it was Commodore 64 for a long time. That was da sh!t as it opened up my eyes to a world of new experiences including basic programming. (Used to buy books that had code in to make your own games! YAY) The system used tape drives as storage so I remember getting into a lot of trouble because i used to erase my older sisters' music cassettes for more storage space. Also you could make copies using a double tape deck!!!" Shahied (2010)

In the 1990s, Nintendo was challenged by other video game console makers, such as Sega, and by games developed for the personal computer – such as *Wolfenstein* – the first “First person shooter.” When asked where his love for gaming evolved from, Zakaria was one of those who found the PC games the more interesting route:

"Played Wolfenstein, Doom, Quake. Loved the Sierra franchises. Space Quest, Heroes quest, police quest. Leisure Suit Larry. There were tons of PC games. Gods was awesome. Ugh! Was incredible for a small game. Syndicate from Bullfrog. Wing Commander was the first game with voice and wow what a difference a sound blaster made!!! There are soooo sooo many." Zakariyah (2010)

This era also saw the creation of ever better performing “generations” of game consoles, rip off devices and the creation of ever more extreme and violent games; and a series of brand wars that drove game marketing in spirals of escalating symbolic investment aimed at increasingly mature and media savvy niche of youthful male players. For Shahied (2010) this period led to exposure to other gaming platforms besides the PC:

“My preference always leant towards computer gaming but my real exposure to the greater gaming community came about when I got my first console - 8bit Golden China (NES ripoff!) - Cartridges were the currency of choice and was more valuable than money itself depending on the titles you owned. I remember my first purchase being Super Mario at CLICKS of all places. LOVED IT DEARLY!!!!”
Shahied (2010)

Kline et al (2003) argues that this period of ‘internecine warfare’ brought disaster to many individual companies and threatened new crisis of technology and symbolic overproduction. But its overall effect was to deepen the transformation of the industry from a ‘technology-driven’ to a ‘consumer-driven sector’, further enlarging its translational scope and making it a hothouse for experiment in the management of digital design for youth markets.

In the later 1990s the growth of the game industry attracted the established electronic empires. The multinational giant Sony advanced on the video game business with its enormously successful PlayStation console, while Microsoft gradually leaned its massive weight on the growing computer game market before joining the console fray with its Xbox. The appearance of these behemoths marks the recognition of interactive gaming as a key competitive arena in the struggle between the largest of the global multimedia corporations.

Zakaria saw the introduction of the behemoths in the following light:

“The PS, PS2 and Xbox I would say didn't blow the competition away in terms of performance. However, what they did do was bring gaming out from being a 'gamers' domain into being an everybody's thing. Sony marketing of the PS and PS2 targeted mainstream public. So everyone was getting a PS. Not just the hardcore gamers. Of course this meant there games started becoming dumbed down. Also as the market now shifted, the Adventure genre started slipping away and the 3D adventure platformer took its place”. Zakaria (2010)

The major shift during the millennium has been on the re-emergence of Nintendo as a major player and the rise of online gaming. After losing ground to the major behemoths during the 1990's, Nintendo game back with a bang with the launch of its

handheld Nintendo DS platform. It was released in 2004 in North America and Japan. The console features a clamshell design with two LCD screens inside—with the bottom one being a touch screen. In 2006 Nintendo released the hugely popular Nintendo Wii device which used a wireless sensor to simplify and enhance gameplay. Zakaria (2010) bemoaned what he perceived to be the further dumbing down of gaming, although he does grudgingly admit it added to mainstream appeal:

“The Wii is doing again what Sony did for gaming in the 90s. It’s bringing gaming to everyone. Even those that never had an interest in holding a d-pad. On the good side, gaming is now more mainstream. On the bad side, you get these really idiotic games that are dumbed down. Precision has been forsaken for swinging a controller. As a hardcore gamer, I still prefer the accuracy and latency of wired mouse and keyboard on a PC. That being said, picking up a controller and playing Gears is a lot easier and is quite fun.” Zakaria (2010)

Online gaming has grown as well, through the Microsoft Xbox live format. Maan (2010), another participant was an avid player who regularly went online to challenge players around the world:

“Yah, I really got into X box Live x live when the kids were asleep. Before I got cut off because I flashed my box and Microsoft did a random cut off thing.” Maan (2010)

This section was intended to give historical context of the development of gaming worldwide and give some insight as to how gamers at the LAN had experienced these global shifts as they developed their interest in gaming. As gaming has always had a strong youth focus and a long tradition of producing games with violent content, it is perhaps understandable that society has viewed gaming with a great deal of fear and trepidation. In the next chapter this social context is discussed further.

Chapter 7: Games are Evil!

As electronic gaming has become established as one of the dominant forms of entertainment of our time, there has been widespread debate in the public sphere over the merits of the medium. Some have accused games of promoting violence and sexism. Despite very little empirical evidence that games lead to antisocial or violent behaviour, Ito et al (2009) points out that popular perception persists in painting a picture of the aggressive, isolated compulsive gamer.

It is perhaps understandable, as a large chunk of popular games such as *Super Mario Sunshine* (2002), *Tomb Raider* (1996) and *Metal Gear Solid* (1998), to take a limited range of examples, are all apparently designed for the single player, exploring and battling alone against the enemies, obstacles and spaces of the game world. Moreover, and demonstrated by each of the games above, Aarseth (1998) has termed it the 'man against the environment' theme, in which a single character is charged with the task of saving the day and restoring the previously disrupted equilibrium. Indeed, he contends that it pervades much of Western narrative. This apparently solitary nature of play has been seized upon by detractors of video games. While certain lone, private activity such as journal writing may be valorised (Goody and Watt, 1968 cited in Newman, 2004), the video game has been positioned as an antisocial force, encouraging players to withdraw from society. As Jessen (1995) has noted:

"Serious criticism is levelled at the influence of the medium on children's social relations, it is a common assumption that computer games lead to children becoming socially isolated, all in their separate rooms where they engage in a lone struggle in the artificial universes of the games. In other words, the computer destroys social relations and playing." Jessen (1995, p.6)

Video games are seen by their detractors as not merely responsible for solitary experiences but for isolating one too. As a result, they not only appeal to loners, but actually create them, hence giving rise to the popular conception of videogame fans as reclusive outsiders, distant and disengaged from society, both unwilling and incapable of interacting with other.

What seems to differentiate the game is the absence of friends and alternative leisure opportunities; heavy gamers resort to solitary media for distraction and entertainment. Our evidence is rather limited on this point but, clearly, video games as an activity, like watching TV and videos, is something kids prefer to do when they have no other more social options. Family and sibling play is infrequent, mostly involves playing with brothers, and is more frequent in the occasional player groups. (Kline 1997, cited in Kline 1999: 19)

For many commentators, it appears that video games are imbued with a quite dark potency. In this willingness to view games as addictive as hard drugs, most note an equal and somewhat patronizing unwillingness to acknowledge any sophistication in players' use of digital media. Jessen (1998) notes that since their introduction in the 1980s, home computers have given rise to widespread concerns that young people would be seduced by them.

In general, studies don't seem to support this view. Sherry et al, found that:

“Individuals who spend the longest hours playing were more likely to report playing for Diversion (e.g. ‘I play video games when I have other things to do’, and ‘I play video games when I am bored’) and Social interaction e.g. My friends and I use video games as a reason to get together’.” Sherry et al. (2001. pp11-12)

Sherry et al (2001) conclude that, while at least part of the pleasure of video games play can be understood in terms of displacement of other, perhaps more mundane activities, it is naïve to simply consider video games as providing a diversion from other people. In fact, they suggest that video-gaming is an inherently social activity. Directly contradicting the idea of the solitary player, isolated from social contact, they suggest that, ‘frequent game play appears to be highly social; perhaps the practise of standing around on the street corner has shifted indoors to video game play’. It is interesting to note that not only do Sherry et al (2001) suggest that video game play is, in itself, social, but that engagement in social play is not limited to casual gamers, with hardcore gamers seemingly as likely to engage in non solitary play. Certainly, research conducted by Funk (1992), Emes (1997) and Kestenbaum and Weinstein (1995) concludes that the hypothesized link between frequent videogame play, social withdrawal and isolation cannot be supported with current findings (see also Ivory

2001 and Dorman 1997).

For a further review of the literature on gaming, violence and aggression, see Kutner and Olson (2008). Although there are some indications that high levels of play with mature rated video games is correlated with aggression, there is no conclusive evidence that there is a causative relation or that of game play has any correlation with violent crime. After completing an extensive study of video games and violence, Kutner and Olson (2008, 8) conclude: 'The strong link between video game violence and real world violence, and the conclusion that video games lead to social isolation and poor interpersonal skills, are drawn from bad or irrelevant research, muddle headed thinking and unfounded, simplistic news reports.'⁷

This chapter dealt with one of the more dominant and negative perceptions of gaming, namely that it promotes violence and isolation. As indicated, this is a well researched field in game studies, and the balance of evidence based on our research of the literature would indicate that there is no solid body of material to supported this negative view. One of the implications of debunking this stereotype would then be that gaming has some sort of social context. This is discussed in the next chapter.

7

Chapter 8: The Video game as a Social Space

While studies such as Sherry et al. (2001) debunk somewhat the notion of videogames as solitary or isolated experiences, they are less forthcoming as to the exact nature of social interaction in gaming. In fact it is possible to identify a variety of types of social interaction and locations either created within games during play, or as a consequence of play. Saxe (1994) notes a variety of social interactions that take place during, and as a result of, videogame play:

“On many occasions, at a particularly popular arcade game such as *Virtua Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat*, participants (players, spectators) from diverse racial and age backgrounds are all gathered together, sometimes on very cramped quarters, around the same video screen. On this level, the screen play provides an anonymous opportunity for shared play space among individuals who might not normally participate in joint activities.” (Saxe, 1994)

Players not only reported significant social networks orientated around and emerging from gaming, but also these networks were supportive and non-confrontational. For example players indicated the ways in which they learned from others, and helped others to learn, by sharing information on strategy and technique through talk and observing of the play of others.

This fits in with the position of Loftus and Loftus (1983) who have noted that ‘extrinsic’ reinforcement, such as praise and admiration from peers, constitutes a motivation to play. The simple fact is that, just as not all videogames contain violent content, not all videogames are solitary, single player experiences. Games such as *Call of Duty* (2004) offer many options of play, where players, team can play against each other in different ways or be first to complete a task. In *Call of Duty* (2004) a particular favourite was a mode of play where different teams had to defend a demarcated area.

Multiplayer experiences have long been a staple of the videogame industry. Although simultaneous play on a single screen is perhaps the most common understanding of multiplayer potential, there are many ways in which players may directly compete either face-to-face or by taking advantage of the network capabilities of PCs and

modern consoles. All consoles such as Sega Dreamcast, Microsoft Xbox and Playstation have at least 4 player ports. Participants at the LAN networked 30 PCs and Game consoles. At regional LAN bashes such as the 'OC' over 800 PCs are linked.

It is also perhaps a superficial reading to say that single-player games act as sites of solitary play only. Single players can be played by more than one person. At the LAN the game *Streetfighter (2008)*, a single-player game was played by many players. Players would interchange for such mundane reasons as going to the loo to one where the player knew the way to do something quickly or with more skill. Indeed many games from the 1980s offer their multiplayer optionality in this way, with players taking each sequence in turn one after the other rather than competing simultaneously as with *Virtua Fighter* et al.

Thus far, I have focussed on the social contact fostered within video games as experienced during play. Consequently, the social interactions we have identified thus far have, to a certain extent, been bounded by the tempo and duration of the game and the space within the confines of the hall and its immediate surrounds. Thus, players interact and engage with one another while playing, sharing the experience of the game in various ways, either through competition or collaborative exploration. However, to concentrate solely on the period of play is to significantly impoverish the study of videogames. There is a raft of activity that supports, amplifies and discusses video games, their use, design and creation. Video games exist within what Jessen (1998, 1996, 1995, for example) refers to as a children's computer culture. 'Contrary to appearance, the computer and the games are absorbed into the existing childrens' culture. This happens very much on that culture's own terms – and often in ways that are quite contrary to the interests of the toy market' (Jessen 1995, p6).

Video games and videogame play does not exist in a vacuum. Even if they are played alone, these texts and the experiences of them are located within a set of interpretive practices. In attempting to explain the vehemence of the reactions to popular media fandom and drawing on Bourdieu (1984), Jenkins (1992) has pointed to the ways in which popular fan culture disrupt and resist cultural hierarchies not only in the voracity of their interest in trivial, low texts, but also because fans appear to engage in types of activity than run contrary to interpretive practices preferred by

bourgeois culture. Jenkins (1992) analysis of fandom associated with Star Wars and Star Trek, saw how popular texts were poached, dissected and reassembled, often explicitly filtered through the experiences of other texts. As such, by engaging with the objects of their attention and affection in a most intimate manner and eschewing the aesthetic distance and reverence for authorial ownership and authority in texts, these fans practices can be seen to directly conflict with the dominant aesthetic logic. It follows that these fans are frequently attacked as deviant or perverse readers and, thereby, marginalized as “others” Jenkins (1992).

Ito et al. (2010), presents very recent studies in new media culture amongst American youth. The book reports on a three year ethnographic investigation into how young people are living and learning with new media in various settings. While acknowledging debates surrounding violence and sexism in gaming, Ito et al. (2010) focus primarily on situating gaming within a broader set of ‘media ecologies’ and ‘genres of participation’ with new media. They use empirical material to provide a descriptive base and set of frameworks for understanding the role of gaming in kids’ lives and learning. They identify “genres of gaming practice” which I found useful in classifying and understanding the gamers I was researching. The genres they identify are the following: ‘killing time’ – where certain forms of gaming have provided opportunities to fill small gaps in the day. These would include playing a cell phone game while waiting for a bus for instance or using a Nintendo DS on a train. ‘Hanging out’ gaming is when people engage with gaming in the process of spending time together socially. This is largely a form of friendship-driven sociability, where gaming; whilst important was not the central focus. Perhaps the best example of this would be the Nintendo Wii which appeals to a broad range of players. ‘Recreational gaming’ is when people game or get together, specifically to play games that require persistent engagement to master. Recreational gaming includes everyday in-home gaming, when kids are into a game, or play with friends and family and can be both solitary and social. They include offline and dedicated services such as XBox Live. Ito et al. (2010) identifies that unlike the other genres mentioned earlier, recreational gaming is strongly identified with the historically dominant gamer dynamic – young males. Recreational gaming is deeply social, where the game play is the impetus and focus for getting together. It is interest driven rather than friendship-driven sociality that drives gatherings of this nature. Another important dimension of recreational gaming is that the social relationships and knowledge networks that kids develop often become a pathway to other forms of technical and media-related learning. The

'Organizing and Mobilizing genre,' represent those gamers who invest heavily and will often become involved in more structured kinds of social arrangements, such as guilds, teams, clans, clubs and organized social groupings that revolve specifically around gaming. For the group I gamers I researched, competitive gaming might then represent an evolution of recreational gaming, or they might engage in both genres of gaming. While gaming in "hanging out' or 'recreation' takes place mostly in the private sphere (homes), 'mobilization' requires dedicated spaces, or in our case a rented crèche, which need to provided fast Internet connections and powerful computers to run the games.

The descriptions of these genres of gaming practice and identity provide us with a vocabulary for discussing trajectories of learning and participation with games. Although many avid gamers 'grow out' of playing games, Ito et al. (2010) identified that are moving into an era in which gaming is not an activity confined to a particular life cycle. As my research shows, many of these gamers were in their 30's already and those who had kids were bringing them to the LANs. Although the frequency of the LANs had diminished, it was still important for them to get together with one participant referring to the LAN sessions as 'reunions'. For Ito et al (2010) gaming practise suggests that that learning outcomes of gaming are neither direct nor obvious. The most important benefits of gaming lie in the healthy social ecology of participation. For Ito et al (2010) recasting the debates over games and learning in this more ecological frame is an important corrective to many of the dominant discourses of gaming that have focussed on game content and design.

Having argued in an earlier chapter that gaming in general is not a loner, isolationist activity, this chapter deals with the social activities that take place during gaming. This includes the social activity while gameplay is taking place and the social interaction that takes place at the event itself. The learning, teamwork, mentoring and participation that takes place at gaming events are clear indicators of a healthy and robust gaming ecology which provides for a rich field of study. It is perhaps fitting to move onto the findings and a discussion of the research, which, it will be argued, bears out this view.

Chapter 9: Discussion

Demographics

There were 22 coloured men who filled out the questionnaire and no women. 14 of them shared their Game ID or tag with me with two of the rather colourful names being “Affirmativaction” and ‘Jabberwock”. 77% were Muslim and 4 were Christian and there was one Athiest. Their ages ranged from 17 to 33 and the mean age was 27.32. The median was 28 and modus was 32. They all spoke English as a first language except for one, and all resided in Cape Town. Regarding marital status, 40,9% were married and exactly the same percentage classified themselves as single. There were 2 divorcees and one person classified themselves as ‘living with another.’ In terms of offspring, 5 participants had 2 children each, three had 1 child, the remaining participants (14 or 63.63%) had no children.

Educational statistics were as follows: 40,9% of participants’ highest level of education was high school, 33.6% has gone to a technikon, the period of study varying from 2 to 4 years depending on the institution. Three had gone to college, there was one person with a university degree, and one who was still completing high school.

In terms of occupation, 40.9% or 9 worked in information technology or IT while 5 were graphic designers, indicating a high level of technical computer skills within the group. There was one who worked in education and one student. Six of the participants did not answer this question with the reasonable deduction being made that they were currently between jobs or new to the job market.

In terms of computer and internet usage, not surprisingly the figures were quite high. 95% owned a cell phone, 95 % owned a personal computer, 54% owned a laptop. In respect of internet usage, the figures were high as well, with 60% having used the internet for more 7 years or more and other 22 percent between 4 and 6 years. Numbers regarding where the internet was accessed were equally significant with 54% accessing the Internet at home, suggesting significant broadband penetration and 78% accessing the internet from work. In terms of gaming hours, the data suggested that on average the participants spent 1.7 hours on gaming per day.

The overwhelming games the participants had come to play were the 'First and Third Person Shooters' *Call of Duty* (2007) (54%) and *Gears of War* (2006) (36%). These can be classified as games with violent content. There was also support for the online strategy game Defence of the Ancients, more commonly known as "DotA" which 22% of the gamers wanted to play at the LAN. DotA is a custom scenario for the real-time strategy video game Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos and its expansion, Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne, based on the 'Aeon of Strife' map for StarCraft. DotA scored quite high in relative terms when participants were asked to name their favourite game of all time. DotA had 22 percent of the vote, the same number as Unreal Tournament with the *Call of Duty* and Gear of War games, the two most popular at the LAN only garnered 13 percent of the vote.

Participant Observation

In order to structure my findings gleaned during the participant observation research, I have borrowed a few terms associated with gaming. I have broken by findings into the following categories: **Setup**, referring to the setting up of the LAN event, its initial logistics, the manual labour, the layout of the physical space, the workforce as well as the technical networking to ensure that the computers could be switched on The next category I term **Configuration**. This refers to the point from which the computers are switched on and then configured, including the software networking to allow players to see each other on the network in order to play and share data. The configuration of players' avatars, configuration of teams to do battle with, the selection of games to play, the configuration of game consoles and the controller. The third category is **Gameplay**. This refers to the actual moments playing the various games, the process of playign and the immersion that takes place.

The fourth category, but not a gaming term, is **Social Interaction**. These observations make up the largest part of the study. It includes observations on the actual social interaction during gameplay as well as in between gameplay.. The final category is **Learning and Sharing**. These are reflections on the type of learning and sharing that took place.

Participant Observation: Setting Up

As mentioned earlier, this LAN took place at the Athlone Methodist crèche. The hall is available for hire over weekends at a cost of R600 and is about 40 meters in length and 20 meters wide. This was paid for personally by Gamat and a collection went out at the LAN to cover costs. Gamat informed me in a pre LAN interview, that sometimes they come short and sometimes they have a bit more; in the case of a surplus, this goes into a 'kitty' for equipment. The actual set up of the LAN involved darkening the hall, setting up of existing tables for computers to rest on it, a networking hub to allow the computers to communicate. Gamat had also hired additional tables which he had at his home in case the tables were not enough. There were no real instructions meted out although the lead was taken by Gamat. He seemed to be the one who had the final say of things. It should perhaps be noted that it appeared that his most important function was to make sure the networking was fine. The networking gear, specialised cables and specialised hubs, were stored in two black industrial workers' boxes. Everything was neatly packed and rolled. In the field notes I made, I mentioned the phrase 'military precision'. There was definitely a sense of order and neatness and speed to the set up. This can be ascribed to the experience of having done it before; but in my scribblings, I did make a note to ask if the military precision of the games themselves had an influence on the set up.

The equipment being used at the LAN was highly specialised. For instance, red cables were custom-made by one of the networking IT participants to accommodate heavy duty data to flow through them. The two networking hubs could easily accommodate 15 and 20 computers connected to them. The networking structure was also fluid enough to accommodate different networking configurations (discussed later).

The set up also included the setting up of a Nintendo Wii console for the kids who were attending. I counted four kids of players between the ages of 7 and 12. They were allowed to play the more family-friendly Wii, and sports games were loaded to allow them to compete with each other. They were not allowed to play the ultra-violent games although they were allowed to watch.

The gamers had the use of a canteen. This had been organised by Gamat and included the use of an urn which was owned by the crèche. Food at this LAN was not a communal activity but rather something you did on your own or with a few of your fellow participants. I noticed that a quite a few times someone within one group would slip out and get food. Some players also brought food or snacks with them from home and snacked at they played. Eating food was done in front of the PCs. I did not notice anyone moving to another space away from the PC to eat.

Participant Observation: Configuration

Once the computers were switched on the configuration of the network took place. The networking guys went to work, connecting IP addresses ensuring the participants could see each other in order to compete and share data. At this LAN, one half of the tables were set up primarily to play the Xbox game, *Call of Duty* (2007), which required the additional networking of the Xbox console. One set of tables had participants playing the online game *Defenders of the Ancients*. They were referred to as 'DotA boys.' Sharing of data took place on all the PC's as they were networked, although there did seem to be one or two PCs where players would converge and chat as if to suggest that these PCs contained the latest downloaded material.

I noticed a few instances of configuration of game controllers. At the beginning of the gaming, this happened during the playing of *Streetfighter* (2008), where the various players would configure the controller to suit their needs.

Participant Observation: Gameplay

The first game to get set up was *Streetfighter* (2008) on the Microsoft Xbox console. This was a popular 'old school' game, involving one on one fighting which immediately caused the players to congregate around that particular monitor. The older players took pleasure in challenging each other and the younger players hovered around. There was not one particular winner as there seemed to be randomness about the play. Players changed who they selected as avatars quite frequently. It seemed to be a 'warm up' for the real stuff, not very competitive, with

no one really sitting (winning) for long and many guys getting a chance to just have a game.

When *Call of Duty (2007)* was set up, 'real' gaming seemed to commence. *Call of Duty (2007)* is a first-person shooter video game developed by Epic Games for the Microsoft Xbox 360. For the most part, it was played in 'third person shooter' mode allowing the player to see and control the player on the screen as the player moves within the terrain. It is the second instalment of the *Call of Duty (2007)* series. The game has expanded technically on the previous game by using a better gaming engine and improved graphics.

In *Call of Duty (2007)*, the Human Coalition of Ordered Governments (COG) forces continue their battles against the Locust horde, who are attempting to sink all of the cities on the planet Sera by using a humongous riftworm to eat the ground beneath them. The hero of the game is again Sergeant Marcus Fenix who leads the crack Delta Squad into the dark depths of the planet to try to stop the worm from eating but instead they discover the true intent of the Locust actions. The game includes several existing and new multiplayer modes including five-on-five battles between human and Locust forces, and a 'Horde' mode that challenges up to five players against waves of Locust forces with ever-increasing strength.

Participants played 'wingman' mode which splits all ten players into five teams of two, where both members of a team play as the same character. Participants team up into twos with two players on one split screen. Players had to hunt down opposition players. The game allows you to interchange various weapons with the favourite being the Lancer which was an assault weapon with a chainsaw at the end. Players seemed to strive to kill opposition by either sneaking up to them or wounding them in such a way that they were an easy kill for the Lancer weapon. The actual kill act via the chainsaw was an extremely violent act, where the chainsaw cut down the chest of the avatar, splitting him down the middle with blood splattering everywhere. If you were killed, you did not necessarily know who had done the deed, therefore the most common cry was an agitated voice asking "Who killed me?" Someone would acknowledge the kill and would then usually be sworn at.

Another aspect that struck me about the game was the sound, not only of the game but of the players shouting at each other. Although no one looked about, it seemed

they were able to converse with each other while playing the game. Players also frequently left to do something else and someone else would jump in and team up adding a fluidity to play and suggesting that the players were not interested in holding onto their own team or score.

On another set of screens the DotA boys played out their fantasies. I counted five gamers engaged in this game. This section of the LAN layout was much quieter, and players seemed more focussed on the game. The objective of the game scenario is for each team to destroy the opponents' Ancients, heavily guarded structures at opposing corners of the map. Players use units known as heroes, and are assisted by allied heroes and AI-controlled fighters called 'creeps'. As in role-playing games, players level up their heroes and use gold to buy equipment during the mission. My observations are that the game moved at a slower pace and as a spectator it was not very exciting, especially when compared to *Call of Duty* (2007). However, the players seemed more caught up in the gameplay and strategy required to advance. The third gaming platform was the Nintendo Wii which was set up for the kids attending. The kids played without supervision and seemed quite adept ant all aspect of the games they played. The most popular game played was *FIFA Word Cup 2010*.

Participant Observation: Social Interaction

A key concept for Wenger is that of 'communities of practice' which he defines as 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'. Wenger circa (2007) Clearly, the LAN gamers can be considered a community of practice. The LAN bashes had been taking place over a number of years, the players were clearly passionate about gaming and they interacted regularly, including outside of the LAN sessions. Social interaction was a very strong component of the LAN. As indicated during the introduction, this was not only a LAN session but a farewell to 'Bogard' who was going to teach in Japan.

The gamers had a shared 'domain of interest', namely games, they were committed to this domain and this had distinguished them from other people and other types of gamers. Members engaged in joint activities such as setting up the network, buying

food, the actual act of playing games and socialisation between playing games. The members were thus not just observers, they were practitioners. They had a shared repertoire of resources and experiences dating back ten years for some. A prime example of this was the care and sophistication they displayed in setting up the network which could only have been achieved through knowledge sharing and sustained interaction.

There was clearly a demarcation between older or 'owned' members and those who were 'noobs'. As I was succinctly told by Gamat, "Don't be a noob. Not good." However, it was clear through chatting that everyone had started out as a 'noob' and had 'earned' their way towards respectability. This could be done by being useful technically, being a good player or by bringing interesting downloads to share amongst the players. Those who helped out and 'stayed till the end' also garnered respect. The older gamers greeting each other with real affection, offering complicated handshakes and the occasional hug. The younger players would get a nod and a quick handshake. There was no get together before or during the gaming sessions to 'introduce' a new player or attendee. The new player needed to navigate his own way in terms of getting status within the group and making friends.

The kids who were there were left to their own devices. As the event took place at a crèche there was a small playground in the quad area where the kids played for a bit. The Nintendo Wii was set up for them within the hall but separated from the main game tables, and they seemed to be having lots of fun playing amongst each other. There were no mothers or spouses or partners around: this suggests that it was clearly the responsibility of the dad to look after the children. I did not notice any dad hover over his children. The dads played games and the children had to fend for themselves. Although the children were not allowed to play certain games due to their violent content, all of them managed to watch as their dads played, although they took care not to stand too close. I did notice that a few dads lost patience with their child/ren while they were playing and the children asked them to do something. At these times the children were instructed to play Wii and not to bother them while they were playing.

Once the gaming got under way, players would leave and come back to play. There was plenty of banter at the *Call of Duty* (2007) tables (as mentioned earlier) and a fair amount of profanity. Players were also commonly identified by their gaming handle

during conversation. I did not notice much discussion surrounding gameplay and strategy for gaming. Most players seemed content to just play. However, it is clear that by playing within a competitive environment with many skilled players, gamers would improve their gameplay. While chatting to one player, it emerged that he was actually a local 'champion' who won the most recent OC tournament in Bellville and was highly regarded amongst his peers. He, together with his clan had recently been featured in a local television show. Having him around and observing how he operated would be a real learning experience to any gamer wanting to improve their game. It was also clear that players displayed a sensitivity to each others' needs. I observed one player go over to another who was constantly losing his battles, and explain what he was doing wrong. The less-skilled players seemed to respond and to help – this was done in a positive manner and the recipients were quite thankful. People were (surprisingly) willing to help out their fellow players with quests and other things, even when there was no obvious benefit for themselves. This seems to contrast with everyday life, and games could therefore teach not only skills but also values, and more precisely altruism.

The calmer periods, when there was no gameplay, presented opportunities for the players to talk with each other about a variety of topics, game-related or not. As such, they were an important social stage where players could learn and where social interaction could be pursued for its own sake and there was no need produce any extrinsic results. Players used the canteen and chatted amongst each other, catching up. I sat in on two conversations where jobs were discussed. In one conversation, a young player was bemoaning the difficulty of finding work. The older player then told him that he could get him into his company to effectively pack boxes. The older player indicated that his company paid R6 000 for someone to pack boxes and the younger player expressed real interest in pursuing this opportunity. In another conversation, a young-looking player was complaining that a cousin at an advertising agency was not helping him to get his foot in the door even though the cousin had a powerful position within the company. The LAN was thus an opportunity to network for work. This is backed up somewhat by the empirical data where 5 of the participants indicated that one of the activities they partook in at the LAN was the networking for jobs. Advice on various topics was also dispensed during breaks, such as Bogarde's advice regarding travel visas and another exchange where Calvin, (a motor journalist) dispensed advice regarding the purchasing of a motor vehicle.

Indeed, playing at a LAN seemed essentially about hanging out with people. They had become a new form of the local pub: instead of having a few drinks and a lot of laughs with your friends, you battle clans and have a lot of laughs with your friends. Games, while intense, did not focus purely on how you were using your joystick: there are opportunities for sociable interaction too, and these are another important source of social learning.

As a lot of not playing time was spent 'doing nothing' (or, to put it differently, not killing anything) it was important for a player to demonstrate that he was an interesting person to be with. I found that most players used this time to talk to each other. During these moments, humour and the "LOL"(laugh out loud) response were extremely important for group cohesion and success. As such, periods of downtime were the perfect platform for players to experiment and learn about sociable behaviour – a skill that could easily translate to the physical world. Players learnt about how and when to use humour, and how to approach strangers and progressively build up relationships.

Moreover, games were an ideal platform for experimenting with sociability because there is always something to talk about. The game's objectives are ideal conversation starters and ice-breakers: players share a lot of common ground because of the game's framework – if nothing else, you can always talk about the last mutant zombie you killed or where to go next if playing a quest game.

Participant Observation: Learning and Sharing

There were many levels of learning I observed. During the set up there were a few younger players who had arrived early. As mentioned earlier, there were no instructions given as to the set up but they observed things keenly and assisted with setting up trestles. This applied to the cabling aspect as well. Gamat laid out the cables but everyone linked power to their own machines and quite a few linked their machines to the network without any problems. Certain participants did have specialised skills which helped with fixing problems. Although there were a few key linking PCs, there was a high degree of skills within the group to cope with unexpected problems. For instance, when someone could not connect his computer, he called out "I need a network guy!" who promptly arrived and sorted him out.

Another player changed two electricity leads around and put them in different plugs to make sure that it would not overload and cause a trip during play. Due to the high degree of IT skills within the participants, it was easy to fix any technical problems that might arise.

As new players entered this game world, they were confronted by a bewildering array of new and foreign concepts – much like a stranger entering a new culture. The game manual, however, says nothing about these concepts: instead, the greatest resource in learning how to play is fellow players. In fact, it seems game companies have even acknowledged this fact implicitly. Game manuals are frequently quite skinny, limiting themselves to a cursory description of the most basic commands. Players are encouraged to ask questions in the game and to rely on the players' community for knowledge.

Therefore, LAN gaming sessions offer another source of social learning: namely, learning how to ask questions and more generally how to learn from others. I observed three forms of in-game knowledge acquisition:

Asking questions in the game: for instance, "What is the best technique for using your chainsaw?" This can be done either by "shouting" the question while playing, or on a more person-to-person basis in the context of a group or some other interaction. The latter is often a more successful strategy: players learn to establish a rapport with others instead of randomly begging for help.

Most of the game's actions are carried out in public view. As such, it is easy for players to stand at the periphery and observe the actions of more advanced and successful players. In some ways, online games support a form of 'legitimate peripheral participation' Lave and Wenger (2001). It is acceptable for a player to stand close to the action and observe silently. These observations can then form the basis of more focused questions, which have a higher chance of being answered.

The sharing of data and downloads took place within a social context. Participants would gather at a particular machine and discuss the stuff they wanted to copy. Due to everyone having different file structures on their machines, it seemed the easier option was to rather go to that person and see what he had. Participants copied pirated movies, TV series, comedy and award shows, pornography, music videos

and MP3s, cell phone ring tones, video clips and games. There were numerous discussions surrounding the merits of movies and TV shows or games to allow the 'copier' to decide if he wanted to copy something. Questions of quality of copying also arose regarding the data. Participants also mentioned that they needed to copy certain data for a wife, family or a particular friend. Those with children copied children's movies and TV series.

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Chapter 9: Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

This thesis has investigated a Local LAN event using a variety of ethnographic techniques. Qualitative and quantitative research was compiled and analysed to answer the research question.

- What type of learning and social activity takes place at a LAN event?

Quantitative in the form of an exploratory survey and qualitative methods in the form of participant observation and online interviews were used to gather research.

During the research it became clear that the demographic information was not really relevant and threw up more questions than answers. As I had such a small sample, clearly no generalisations could be made from the demographic data. The data was fairly basic, and not very revelatory. What was interesting was the fact that over 70% of the game players were Muslim and it would have been interesting to ask questions related to this gaming activity within the social activities of the greater Muslim community of Cape Town.

Although we did get some indication of the games that were preferred, again, no real inferences can be made beyond that there is a fairly equal split between those that play popular 'first-person shooter' games and those that play fantasy role-playing games.

A follow up quantitative survey, perhaps with a bigger sample would give us new insights. Questions as to why certain games were preferred would also be of interest. What happened to the shared data once it left the LAN would also be an interesting issue to take further. The absence of women and questions of gender could also be teased out by further quantitative analysis. The questionnaire would have been more relevant if the questions was framed and delineated better. I think that it would be more relevant to get quantitative information from one or all of the commercial LANs that run in Cape Town. This would allow for richer data and come from a larger sample.

The follow-up online interviews also proved somewhat disappointing. Few people engaged in answering follow up questions. When they did respond, the answers were slanted towards nostalgia of what it was like to play games 'back in the day'. Although, this was interesting and some of the replies were captured in the 'History of Gaming' chapter, it did not lead to any meaningful insight. It probably did not help that the online questions were sent to a list of email participants which meant that everyone could see the responses and that might have stopped people from sending through their replies. Perhaps a more proactive method such as setting up personal interviews would have borne more fruit.

In terms of the research question, the participant observation made it clear there were varied and important social practises and learning taking place at the LAN event.

There is little doubt that the LAN gaming session was an opportunity for gamers to socialize, learn and share. Social skills such as having or developing a sense of humour, displaying leadership, showing discipline, the act of approaching someone to ask for help were all social practices which could be practised and learnt at a LAN event. Friendships were maintained and encouraged, there was a history of shared experience and a clear informal learning structure in place whereby a new member could 'progress' up the levels as it were. The research clearly indicates that the participants used the opportunity as a meeting place to enhance social practises. These social practices occurred throughout the LAN session. It started with the organisation and coordination to get the LAN happening at a particular date. There was a high degree of technical know-how that was needed to get the network up and running and ensuring that it ran smoothly.

There is no doubt that the LAN event fits into the expectations of the Situated Learning theoretical framework. Learning is clearly an act of 'social participation in a community of practise' (Lave and Wenger 1991). The LAN gaming group can be defined as a 'communities of practice' as they are a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something, in this case gaming. They do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. This can be seen in the sophistication of the networking and cabling, the organisation and participation of players as well as the accommodation of kids.

The main organisational core of the group has been together for more than 10 years and therefore they have shared experiences and ways of addressing recurring problems. They developed a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing problems - in short a shared practice, which is a key pillar of situated theory. This shared practice takes time and sustained interaction.

As the 'noob' moves from the outskirts, going from an observer of this community towards its centre, they become more active and engaged within the culture and hence assume the role of 'owned'. Furthermore, situated learning is usually unintentional rather than deliberate. Lave & Wenger (1991) call this the process of 'legitimate peripheral participation'.

An interesting observation of the LAN was the fact that job networking took place. Potential employers or those with access to recruitment within companies could informally 'evaluate' participants and so form an opinion based on their participation and interaction at the LAN or perhaps the skill of their gameplay. As this particular group were mostly Muslim it does lead to questions of whether these types of events have contributed to their being a strong Muslim presence within IT and whether this type of gathering, where a high degree of skill is required can be applied to other gaming groups from other communities.

Another interesting observation was the inclusion of children at the event. Although the children were not always supervised, they were allowed to play certain games and observe. This would indicate that LAN events could be seen as important centres of child development and education. The children got to experience an event organised by their fathers or brothers. They are made to feel welcome. They get to observe male adult behaviour within a cultural space. It also begs the question as to the absence of women. Not only at the event as players or organisers, but, if the children are with their fathers what type of cultural activities could the women be engaged in, considering that it is quite a significant amount of time to be apart. How does this affect the relationship dynamic between partners? Further research is definitely required in this area.

Although this LAN event was well attended, relative to the amount of invitations sent

out, one does wonder if the growing popularity of online gaming would have a negative effect on future LANs where there would be no need to cart your PC and need complicated networking equipment to get set up. Or, would the relentless advance of technology actually enhance the relationships between the gamers in that those that leave the area or move overseas can continue to connect via a virtual LAN and thus maintain friendships.

In terms of the literature and perspectives outlined in the thesis, there is no new light shed on defining games in any remarkable way. Our research falls within the *Situationalist* approach and focussed on game players and game culture at large with a description of a specific event with social outcomes. The historic and business perspective outlined in the research could be a fascinating area of further research. In my research, it was clear that the LAN participants grew up during the defining decades of the modern gaming industry and as consumers and in some case producers of this interactive media, they represent a wealth of possible research insight if done correctly. As they exclusively drawn from a sub group of a previously marginalised group, it would be interesting to see if their actions could be seen as subversive to the dominant cultural practices of that era. The social nature of the LAN would also fall in line with the perspective that gamers are not loners and outcasts but rather productive members of society, although it would perhaps be a bit naïve it state this based on one LAN organised amongst friends.

While this thesis has many flaws in terms of research methodology, it must be remembered that this is an exploratory study, which by its very nature should throw up many questions for further investigation. The evidence would suggest however, that it does answer my research question. Clearly, in the social context of a LAN event, many forms of social practises and learning occurs and that as an area of research it warrants and deserves further scrutiny.

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