# 'Technic' Practices of The Computer Game Lanner: Identity Development through the LAN-Gameplay Experience.

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis is a reception analysis using qualitative interviews to investigate the formation of cultural groups around computer-game LANs present in Rhodes University. It also looks at how issues of social inequalities evident on the university's campus impact on the participation of students in these LANs.

The findings of this study are that the participants have established a community around the practice of computer LAN-gameplay based on values developed through the combination of the material and gameworlds. It serves as a home-on-campus for them; where they can fully explore their passion for games thus reaffirming their identity as gamers on a campus where being a gamer is viewed negatively. In this light, computer-game playing is not just a practice these participants perform, but a culture they live out every day.

This is a culture predominantly lived out by men. One of the reasons for this is because most women have been raised to believe to have negative predispositions about digital gaming e.g. that it is childish, addictive and anti-social, but also that computer are meant to be used by men – women use them only when it is absolutely necessary, for example, that it is childish, for academic-related purposes. As a result, not many of them will use computers for any other reason for fear of being socially criticised.

In addition, the gaming culture being dominated by whites is due to the fact that admittance in to this community is still unaffordable for the majority of black[1] students on the Rhodes University campus as a result of their social backgrounds.

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[1] The term 'black', here, refers to African, Coloured and Indian students.

# Contents

# Preface

I would like to thank my father, for enabling me by granting me opportunities I am only privileged to take. My mother, for never giving up on me and always being there for me – even from a distance. I would also like to thank my supervisor, for his essential guidance, encouragement and confidence in my ability to see this thesis through.

Not forgetting everyone else who contributed in any way to my academic and, most importantly – my social development. I did not make it this far on my own.

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I started playing digital games at a young age when I first got exposed to arcade games which required a small fee for one to play. Then, I was bought my first console. Back then, consoles prominently used cartridges unlike those ubiquitous today that use disks. Also, console and computer games had sketchy graphics, simple story lines and easy game mechanics. Since then, digital games have improved and so too has the technology on which they are used. They have become more complex, even integrating the internet as a space to facilitate gameplay. This means that they require more knowledge about the technology and skill in using it from the player.

In January 2009, I started my Master's degree in Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University. Mainly theoretical in focus, this degree delved deeper into cultural studies amongst other threads of media theory. I point out this thread because it introduced to me studies which investigated the behaviour of people in relation to analogous media such as television and newspaper. It also exposed me to cybercultural studies: another discipline within media studies in which the behaviour of people in relation to new media such as computers and the internet is investigated. Both disciplines posed and attempted to answer questions such as: How do people use the internet and why? Which people use the internet? Why? How does this impact on broader social patterns and power structures and how is it influenced by the patterns and structures? These questions opened my eyes, allowed me to think critically about what I experienced and saw happening around me and it is the exploring of these different aspects of culture and society that has attracted me to cultural studies.

Being a keen console digital-game player when I arrived at Rhodes University, I wanted to associate myself with fellow players at this institution. I took an interest in students who would play computer games together via a local area network (LAN)[2] in the residence in which I stayed. Unfortunately there were no console-video game players and I did not have access to a computer possessing the technical features required for gaming purposes. Console-video gaming differs from computer gaming because, although similar software and hardware such as hard

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[2] An acronym for the term "Local Area Network": a connection between computers which facilitates communication amongst them. This connection is 'local' in the sense that the computers it links have to be in close physical proximity to one another e.g. within a single building or room (Halsall, 1988).

drives and programming for the gameworlds is used, their human interface mechanisms are different. Human interface mechanisms are tools which allow the user/human to interact with the gameworld (Sicart, 2008). Consoles such the *Playstation 3* require their users to use joysticks to input their commands/actions whereas computers largely require their users to use a mouse. In this sense, even if one game is produced for both platforms, its gameplay experience will still be different due to the platforms' disparity in input mechanisms as some players prefer using the mouse over the joysticks when playing First-Person Shooters (FPSs). My search for fellow console-video game players I could identify with led me to joining a student society on campus called The Gaming Society. This society recruits students whose interests lie in all types of games, including computer and console-video games, and organizes events at which the playing of these games takes place.

I attended one of these events where I noticed that, once again, the playing of computer games was more prevalent than that of console-video games. Also, like my fellow residence house-mates, the majority of these computer-game-playing Gaming Society members were young white men who seemed to know each other well. With the buzz of the event mainly focused on the computer game LAN gameplay taking place, console-video game players, who were about a handful including myself, were pushed to the sidelines. Feeling isolated, we looked in awe at the intensity of bustle around the LAN-facilitated gameplay. I attempted to join this buzz as it was appealing in its liveliness but I did not have much experience in computer-game LAN playing, or knowledge about its technology (hardware) and the game-system itself (software). This quickly exposed me as one who did not belong – an outsider so I was eventually pushed aside and ignored.

This experience led me to think about the kinds of relationships at work during that gathering and how issues of socio-economic class, race and gender amongst other factors contributed to my sense of exclusion. How did the relation between my knowledge of and experience in computer-game LAN gameplay, and my ability to access computers and their games as technology, connect to broader socio-cultural issues? Furthermore, how did the relation between these factors influence the formation and establishment of identities and cultures around computer-game LAN gameplay? This is how my interest in writing my MA thesis on how a

computer game played via LAN and the physical context in which it is played contributed to the establishment of a particular identity and shared culture.

So through my thesis, I wanted to investigate the type/s of relationship/s shared amongst members of a computer-game LAN group in Rhodes University as well as the practices and identity on which this/these relationship/s is/are founded. Please note that the focus of this thesis on these players' relationships amongst each other is with regard to their playing of computer games together via LANs. I also wanted to uncover why the majority of computer-game LAN players both in my residence and in the Gaming Society were white men. My latter goal required a deeper investigation into whether socio-cultural issues on campus impacted on the ability or willingness of other racial/ethnic groups to take part in this activity.

This thesis, then, is a result of reading in the field and conducting individual and focus group interviews with one computer-game LAN group who are members of the Gaming Society at Rhodes University. It is divided into the following sections:

## Chapters 2 and 3: Literature Review

This section discusses the literature relevant to my study. Beginning with an overview of audience-reception analysis and the importance of the social context therein, I move on to discuss cybercultural studies as a discipline by incorporating an outline of some important studies in the field. Thereafter, I examine the links between qualitative audience-reception research and cybercultural studies before considering works relevant to computer games as new media and their impact on cultural identity. Here the concept of technologically-driven identities/cultures – technicities – is fore-grounded. This is followed by a discussion on the game in question, *Infinity Ward (2009). Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2. [PC game]. USA: Activision* and the genre of games it belongs to before the chapter concludes with a review of a number of studies that shaped my approach to my research.

## Chapter 4: Research Methodology

In this section, I discuss the methods used in this study as well as the methodological approaches that underpin them. The section starts off discussing the difference between qualitative and quantitative research. It then moves on to focus on qualitative research in greater detail since this

study consists of a three-staged qualitative research design. After briefly discussing Hall's encoding/decoding model, the ethnographic approach to audience research and its recognition of the importance of context, a discussion pertaining to issues of triangulation follows in which I describe how the concept applies to this study's research process. Thereafter, the section closes with an examination of the three stages of the research process.

## Chapters 5 and 6: Findings

This chapter consists of an analysis of the responses obtained from the GameSoc members during the focus group and in-depth interviews conducted. The chapter is divided into a number of sections, namely: Gaming as a social and cultural activity; Perceptions of Rhodes University as a socio-cultural gaming environment and Perceptions of South Africa as a socio-cultural gaming environment. I conclude with an observation that reinforces the relationship between the South African ICT environment and the emergence of these participants' cyberculture.

A few concluding remarks bring the thesis to an end.

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW [Part 1]

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will look at some of the approaches to audience reception within the field of media studies. In doing so, this chapter will explore a number of themes:

2.2       Text-audience relationships in cybercultural studies

     2.2.1     Audience studies

     2.2.2     Cyberculture

     2.2.3     Cyberculture and Qualitative Audience-Reception Research

Concerned with a specific way of considering the audience and their relationships to the media they consume, this thesis will be drawing on audience studies as conceptualised within media studies. I will therefore begin this section by examining how media studies theorists have so-far conceptualized text-audience relationships. I will then narrow my target to focus on computer-game consumption. Various ways of understanding console-video and computer-game cultures, and the social contexts in which they emerge have recently emerged together with the broadening and deepening of digital games research (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006: 2; Marshall, 2004: 61; Klastrup, 2009). This could be the result of the growth of the computer-games industry in monetary value thus signalling its texts' widespread consumption across the world (Fromme, 2003). It could also signal the industry's increased influence on everyday life (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006: 2; Marshall, 2004: 61; Yee, 2002). Despite this emergence of appreciation for console-video and computer-game cultures, the focus of digital games research on these cultures has been narrow and its emphasis on the dialectical relationship between technological systems, in this case – digital games, and social systems has mainly been limited to first-world countries (Escobar, 2000; Raffl et al., bertalanffy.org). This relationship will be discussed in further detail later on in this chapter.

The focus of digital games research on first-world countries does not only mean the sidelining of research into technology's impact on under-developed countries, it also alludes to the privileging of research into the most recent of technological innovations (Escobar, 2000). This thesis aims to

shift the focus of digital games research by looking at technosociality with respect to computer games in a third-world setting. Since the computer game is the media text the thesis focuses on, this section will close off by briefly examining recent studies of computer-game consumers/players during gameplay. These studies, although similar to the one conducted within this thesis, still differ from it significantly. I will discuss these similarities and differences later on in this chapter. Cyberculture is also of great interest to this study because, like the studies that will be examined at the end of the chapter, it is a discipline that provides one with a solid foundation in terms of background information pertaining to the relationship between technology, in this case digital games, and their social context.

## 2.2 TEXT-AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIPS IN CYBERCULTURAL STUDIES

### 2.2.1 Audience studies

During the 1940s and 1950s, audience studies was dominated by quantitative research approaches and underpinned by the desire to establish a relationship between research variables (Morley, 1992). The theoretical orientation behind these methods: the normative paradigm, was developed in opposition to the Mass Society Thesis; a belief in the absolute power of the media text/message over the audience, that the media directly caused their audience to act in particular ways by injecting an ideology into their consciousness which kept them under control – a hypodermic-needle model of the media (Jensen, 1987, 1988; Morley, 1992; Fiske, 1987; Grossberg, 1993). This theoretical orientation will be discussed soon after a brief exploration of the Mass Society Thesis.

The Mass Society Thesis was regarded as pessimistic due to the link it has established between mass society and fascism as well as the role it gave to the media in reinforcing that link; that the media take advantage of the masses' lack of traditional ties and structures by using their propaganda to control them (Morley, 1992). The research strategies this approach used to investigate the relationship between the media and their audiences were behaviourist in orientation and included message-based studies and "which moved from an analysis of the content of messages to their effects on audiences" (Morley, 1992; 41).

Developed in opposition to the Mass Society Thesis, the positivist, normative paradigm is regarded as having a more optimistic conceptualization of the audience-media relationship because it opposes the 'pessimistic' thesis's representation of the masses as having a total lack of traditional ties and structures, "It took too far the thesis that all intermediary structures between leaders/media and the masses had broken down" (Morley, 1992: 41). Like the Mass Society Thesis, it acknowledges the effects of the media on their audiences, but it does not view these effects as all-powerful or direct (Jensen, 1987; Dahlgren, 1997; Morley, 1992; Grossberg, 1993). However, unlike the thesis's understanding of the audience as textual subjects whose subjectivity is at the mercy of the texts they consume, the normative paradigm regards the audience as social subjects whose subjectivity is constituted not only by their textual experience, but also by their lived, social experience (Fiske, 1987; Jensen, 1988; Dahlgren, 1997; Grossberg, 1993).

As a result, two sometimes opposing research strategies have developed within this paradigm: on the one hand, message-based studies which are concerned more about the relationship between the behaviour of audiences and the content of the messages they consume; on the other, audience-based studies that focus more on the connection between audiences' social backgrounds and the likelihood that they would be persuaded by messages they receive (Jensen, 1987; Fiske, 1987; Morley, 1992; Dahlgren, 1997). In disagreement with the mass society thesis' tendency to focus only on the message and infer audiences' behaviour from its content, Merton argued that, although its approach had its uses, the thesis' failure was in its inconsideration of the audiences' responses (Morley, 1992). He argued that it is for this reason that the thesis could not explain the processes involved in audiences' acceptance or resistance of communicated messages (Morley, 1992). For these processes to be explored, the content of messages had to be analysed together with audiences' responses as these together with the audiences' social backgrounds form the cultural context in which the messages are communicated (Morley, 1992).

The two-step flow of communication model, developed in line with the idea that media content interpretations cannot be adequately understood if they are separated from their cultural contexts, emphasises the importance of the opinion leaders of various consumer groups to which individual consumers belong (Dahlgren, 1997; Morley, 1992). This two-step model of communication rejected the hypodermic-needle model of the media in arguing that consumer groups form a protective 'filter' around each individual within a group and thus also play a role

in determining the individual's response to media content (Dahlgren, 1997; Morley, 1992; Grossberg, 1993). According to Jensen

> These affiliations generate communities of meaning that complement traditional socioeconomic groupings... the social and cultural identities of the audience are established in these communities, and in concrete terms, they are the source of those codes of understanding that audiences apply in interpreting media codes. (1987; 28)

The model also shifted the emphasis of audience research from being message based to being audience based as its focus now centred on the uses of media by their audiences (Jensen, 1987; Morley, 1992).

From this newly established focus, a uses-and-gratifications perspective which "assumed that even the most potent of mass media content cannot ordinarily influence an individual who has no 'use' for it in the social and psychological context in which he/she lives" (Morley, 1992: 43) was developed. This perspective was a new thread of functionalist approach as it differed from more conventional functional approaches that were concerned with the functions of the media for the society as a whole (Morley, 1992). It dealt mainly with the subjective motives and interpretations of individual users and argued that individuals selectively choose which media content to consume based on their values, interests, associations etc. (Jensen, 1987; Morley, 1992). The uses and gratifications approach has sought to describe and explain the experiences audiences gained from particular media content they consume because it argues that individuals use the mass media to gratify certain social and aesthetic needs thus granting them agency in its conceptualisation of the audience/text relationship (Jensen, 1987, 1988; Morley, 1991).

> The image of the powerful media gave way to an image of powerful audiences who could make sense of media output in virtually unlimited ways. (Dahlgren, 1997; 55-56)

Interpretative perspectives such as the uses and gratifications model continued to make advances (Morley, 1992). These advances were in the interpretative paradigm's focus on the role played by language and symbols, the interpretation of action, everyday communication and the process of 'making sense' in interaction, and each of them pointed away from the simplified

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conceptualisation of the audience as having no perceptions of reality prior to their consumption of media content (Morley, 1992). The interpretative paradigm agrees with Merton, Katz and Lazarsfield in arguing that in every reception situation, interaction between the audience and the text, whereby a process of interpretation is involved, takes place (Morley, 1992). While progressing in its bid to displace positivism[3] by promoting the idea that individuals are active in the reception situation (Dahlgren, 1997; Morley, 1991), interpretativism has nevertheless revealed its own weaknesses.

The encoding/decoding model critiques the uses and gratifications model as one that gives too much power to the audience (Strelitz, 2000). It states that in arguing for the notion that audiences have various uses for and interpretations of media texts which differ from how the communicator intended them to use/interpret them, the model over-exaggerates the openness of the text to multiple uses/interpretations (Strelitz, 2000; Morley 1991; Dahlgren, 1997; Morley, 1992). Although media texts can be used/interpreted in different ways, these ways are structured within power relations amongst society's interest groups. There is always a dominant discourse controlling the cultural order which defines the message of a text (Grossberg, 1993; Morley, 1992; Morley 1991; Strelitz, 2000). This discourse is the basis on which a preferred reading/interpretation of a text is expected of the audience, other readings/interpretations, when attained, either negotiate with or oppose the preferred reading (Morley, 1992; Morley 1991).

Hall's critique of this model consists of two parts that form the basis on which his encoding/decoding model is developed (Morley, 1991). On the one hand, the realization that producers of texts have the power to set agendas and define issues (usually in-line with the dominant interpretation) - on the other hand, the conception of the audience as still active within the reception situation despite the agenda-setting power of the producer (Morley, 1991; Grossberg, 1993; Strelitz, 2000). In its attempt to take forward these two insights, Hall's model argues that depending on an individual's socio-economic situation; whether or not he/she belongs to a social class that is aligned with the dominant ideology, he/she will accept, oppose or negotiate with the preferred reading (Fiske, 1987). People that belong to classes which do not or only partially benefit from the dominant discourse will either oppose or incorporate it into their lives by modifying it to meet the needs of their specific situation (Fiske, 1987). It is in this way

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[3] Otherwise known as the normative paradigm (Morley, 1992).

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that Hall's encoding/decoding model fed into the development of ethnographic approaches to the exploration of the audience/text relationship, approaches that take into consideration the role played by sociocultural factors which surround the values and needs that motivate various uses of media texts by audiences (Morley, 1992; Strelitz, 2000).

One of the first theorists to use this model as a framework for a study and thus take a renewed ethnographic approach for the research of audience/text relationships is Morley (O'Shea, 2004). His television-viewing study in which he had a number of participant-groups discuss a television programme, *Nationwide*, after he had them exposed to it, was a way for him to take a structuralist-functionalist position by reinforcing Hall's argument that, although audiences have agency in relation to the textual choices they make, their choices are conditioned within a political, economic and social context (O'Shea, 2004; Strelitz, 2000). Strelitz (2000) states that "Morley stresses the need to see the diversity of tastes and cultural competencies as socially organised and patterned" (Strelitz, 2000: 45). This constituted a shift in focus for Morley from his earlier interest in ideology. To Morley, taking into account the social context of audiences' values, preferences and pleasures with reference to certain media texts meant that in terms of his study, he would have to investigate the domestic context in which the television programme was viewed (Strelitz, 2000). This included situating television viewing, as a practice, within social relations that took place in the house (Strelitz, 2000).

The interpretative paradigm has since taken its interest in socially situated audience interpretations a step further. It has shifted its focus on to investigating audiences' patterns of engagement with different media-text genres: "What is at issue here is how we can begin to understand the particular pleasures which particular types/genres of material seem to offer to particular audiences in specific social situations" (Morley, 1991; 48). Now, a researcher would have to consider not only whether audiences accept/reject messages as influenced by their social backgrounds, but also how those messages are relevant/ irrelevant to certain audiences hence how they are understood by different audiences (Strelitz, 2000). This development in the paradigm thus seeks to find out, in addition to the above-mentioned issue and the manner in which audiences interpret media texts with reference to their social situation, how they understand their practice of reading that type of text in relation to the action of reading other

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types of texts (Morley, 1991). Furthermore, it seeks to explore how this understanding plays a role in audiences' attraction to certain types of texts over others.


### 2.2.2 Cyberculture

The internet's popularity over the years can be attributed to expectations its enthusiasts communicated to its users as promises. Techno-enthusiasts promised users that this technology will grant them a renewed sense of community; bring them closer together by giving them greater control over their connections with each other (Jones, 1998; Benedikt, 2000; Robins, 2000). Since then, theorists have questioned whether these promises have been met and a debate regarding whether the effect the internet, as a medium of communication, has on society is positive or detrimental has ensued (Robins, 2000). Pessimists argue that the internet has actually had a negative effect on society as it alienates people from complex social and environmental necessities present in the material world by allowing them to negotiate their identities on-line only through differentiation and homogenization (Robins, 2000). This means that they are not equipped to deal with aspects of social life such as diversity since e.g. people within communities in the material world do not always get to choose other members of their community and are thus forced to deal with those members who have different subjectivities to their own (Jones, 1998; Baym, 1998; Poster, 1998; Kolko and Reid, 1998; Wilbur, 2000).

The promises made by techno-enthusiasts were based on the notion that the internet would serve as an immaterial/digital environment/space, otherwise known as a 'cyberspace'[4], in which users, either individually or as groups, interacted and developed cultural forms of expression through social relations that included a ritualised sharing of information (Poster, 1998; Jones, 1998; Benedikt, 2000). In line with Berger and Luckmann's work on the social construction of reality which states that a community is constituted in conversation and interaction, the interaction that would bring about the emergence of communities online would take place within this computer-facilitated space (Jones, 1998). This interaction is known as computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Poster, 1998; Jones, 1998; Benedikt, 2000).

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[4] An on-line, computer-mediated environment in which CMC can take place and facilitate on-line/cybercommunities or cybercultures.

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In reality, although the internet has in-fact proved useful in contributing to the increased efficiency of communication amongst members of societies and societies themselves, it has done so mainly for members of societies who make up the minority of those societies' populations, and for very few societies in the world (Baym, 1998; Kolko and Reid, 1998). The rest of each population is technologically and socially left behind as political, economic and socio-cultural factors inhibit their access to the necessary resources for them to keep up. The internet thus reinforces the inequalities experienced in the social context of material communities and thus cannot be a solution to its inconsistencies with respect to the distribution of social power amongst interest groups (Jones, 1998; Baym, 1998; Kolko and Reid, 1998). Similarly, one could argue that, despite the fact that no similar claims were made with the advent of digital games, the fact that they depend largely on the same technology as the internet could mean the cultures that emerge from their usage and consumption, and the manner in which they are used and consumed, are also affected by social context in the very much the same way.

Digital games, sometimes referred to as rule-based simulations of cyberspace (Malliet, 2007), are similar to the internet in that they enable controlled user interaction and agency within virtual gameworlds that are tightly monitored by restrictive system rules (Newman, 2002).Since these gameworlds are also facilitated by computer technology, any communication that takes place within them is CMC. Gameworlds are thus cyberspaces in their own right and thus through CMC, they can contribute to the emergence of cybercultures – digital-games cybercultures. When it comes to the usage/consumption/playing of digital games via local area networks (LANs), communication amongst users does not depend solely on computer technology – it also takes place face-to-face. This is because LANs are networks that include only computers or other capable technology that is in the same local vicinity so users involved usually communicate with one another face-to-face from time to time. In fact, computer-game players often get together to play games as a way of enriching their social lives by meeting other people with similar interests to themselves during what is called a 'LAN party'[5] (Wisegeek.com). Unlike LANs, wide area networks (WANs) such as the internet span across longer distances (Mitchell, About.com) hence

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[5] "Refers to a multiplayer gaming event where participants bring their own computers and build a temporary LAN" (Mitchell, About.com).

they are more likely to have greater numbers of users who have never physically met. Therefore, with a lack of face-to-face communication, the major user activity on the internet is mainly text-based which involves conversation and interaction through reading and writing (Jones, 1998).

A cyberspace is more than just a digital context/environment in which virtual social relations take place through CMC[6]; unlike the material context which preceded off-line social relations despite the dialectical relationship it shares with them, cyberspaces are created and maintained by individuals and groups via the continuous production, distribution and usage of hardware and software (Jones, 1998; Benedikt, 2000). Therefore, social relations amongst these groups and individuals not only precede the cyberspace, they have actually created it through reaching some consensus with regard to the use of space for communication – a space which these groups agreed to imagine, a 'consensual hallucination' (Jones, 1998; Benedikt, 2000). Regardless of this fact, cyberspaces also have a dialectic relationship with the social relations that take place both offline and from within them, meaning that the offline social relations affect, but are also influenced by online social relations (Baym, 1998; Kennedy, 2000; Escobar, 2000). Gillespie and Robins state that:

> New communications technologies do not just impact upon places; places and the social processes and social relationships they embody also affect how such technological systems are designed, implemented and used. (Jones, 1998: 13)

The dialectic relationship between cyberspaces, their cybercultures and cultures external to them shows that physical space, although sidelined, still plays a role in on-line social relations. The technology which facilitates the operation and exploration of a cyberspace has to be physically housed within a place in the material world (Jones, 1998; Escobar, 2000). This relationship between the on-line and material worlds is the premise on which notions of CMC's effect on social relations that are both internally and externally situated to it have been established.

In their paper entitled The Web as Techno-Social System: The Emergence of Web 3.0, Raffl et al. (bertalanffy.org) use a critical theory of techno-social systems to conceive of the internet as a techno-social system i.e. a technological and social system. Based on the above-mentioned dialectical approach to the relationship between social structures and social relations or people's

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[6] CMC embodies the totality of social activity taking place online.

preferences and pleasures, this theory argues that any technological system is also a social system for two reasons; it has a dialectic relationship with user-agency – meaning that not only did it emerge from social action, it, in-turn, has an influence on the manner in which social action takes place by either constraining or enabling it (Raffl et al., bertalanffy.org). In this way, it is self-organising (Raffl et al., bertalanffy.org). Also, the technological system plays a role in the challenging or reinforcement of the wider social structure/system and its asymmetrical hierarchies (Raffl et al., bertalanffy.org). The above-mentioned debate regarding whether the internet has fulfilled promises made by its enthusiasts actually supports the argument made by Raffl et al.: that as a technological system, it is affecting and being affected by social structures and individual actions. In the same way, digital games are also considered techno-social (Escobar, 2000).

CMC's impact on social relations ultimately affects the range of identities expressed both within and outside of cyberspace. This is because, as stated before, social relations involve conversation and interaction; both ways of expressing culture and identity (Jones, 1998). Therefore because culture can be understood partly as an expression of identity, cyberculture can thus be explained as an aggregation of identities expressed on-line or in and around the gameworld i.e. the social relations taking place through CMC and face-to-face interaction (Jones, 1998). Furthermore, since cyberculture has the above-mentioned dialectic relationship with CMC and the social relations taking place outside of it – cyberculture is constituted both on-line and off-line (Jones, 1998; Baym, 1998; Robins, 2000). Wellman states that:

> Many of our on-line relationships are embedded in one's off-line. The increased use of technology in the workplace and in school means that CMC, in many ways, exists side-by-side with social relationships already formed ... (cited in Jones, 1998: 29).

It is in this regard that socio-cultural factors come into play through their influence on the range of subjectivities/identities expressed online and around cyberspaces. The expression of each of these subjectivities/identities represents a unique way in which users from similar socio-cultural backgrounds choose to imagine a cyberspace, be it the internet or a gameworld, as a place of interaction (Baym, 1998).

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Five socio-cultural factors have been identified, namely external contexts, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes and participant characteristics (Baym, 1998). For the first factor, researchers draw on the understanding that cyberculture is constituted both online and offline. It consists of multiple external situations in which CMC and all other interaction takes place e.g. pre-existing speech communities or laws (Baym, 1998). These situations, external to cyberspace, provide a base of commonality from which users can draw on in order to communicate with each other. In this sense, they direct CMC styles around external social practices (Baym, 1998).

Temporal structure, the second socio-cultural factor, includes the manner in which CMC takes place amongst users. CMC can only be temporally structured in two ways, synchronistically and asynchronistically (Baym, 1998). Within synchronistically structured CMC, users are on-line at the same time and thus can respond to each other's messages immediately but when CMC is asynchronistically structured, users are not on-line simultaneously therefore they cannot respond to each other's messages immediately (Baym, 1998). Since this thesis will be looking at a cyberculture in and around LAN party, I will be focussing on the synchronistic temporal structure of CMC. This is how the style of CMC is influenced by its temporal structure:

> Differences in temporal structures influences the availability of feedback, the opportunity to compose and rewrite messages before sending them, how many members of a group are participating at any given time, the meanings of some verbal and non-verbal phenomena (such as pauses) ... (Baym, 1998: 43)

As the third socio-cultural factor, computer system infrastructures influence CMC in a number of ways. Computer systems differ in three general ways: physical configuration, which refers to variables such as how many computers are connected to each other, how they are spatially distributed and the speed of the computer system; system adaptability, which refers to the system's programmability amongst other variables; and user friendliness, which looks at variables such as the system's ability to support multiple tasks, flexibility, ease-of-learning etc. (Baym, 1998). So the efficiency of a CMC system depends on its features (physical configuration, adaptability and user friendliness) meaning that these features in-turn impact on users' style of communication and how they organise it (Baym, 1998).

Group purposes are also deemed to impact on the styles of CMC (Baym, 1998). Hollingshead and McGrath have noted four types of purposes/tasks; ones that require the groups to generate ideas; choose amongst already proposed solutions; negotiate conflicting interests and execute performances in competition with opponents or external standards (Baym, 1998). The style of a communicative group depends, in-part, on that group's tasks/goals since it is these tasks which will act as the boundaries that shape the CMC amongst group-participants in terms of the topics discussed and the extent of involvement on the part of each individual (Baym, 1998).

The last characteristic refers to perceptions users have of the technology they use (Baym, 1998). People use technologies in ways that are based on their beliefs/perceptions/expectations regarding how these will benefit them by providing them with pleasure. Other characteristics also influence the manner in which technology is used; these include individual members' familiarity with technology as well as their experience with new technologies (Baym, 1998).

These four socio-cultural factors impact on the formation and style of an online culture only in the sense of how participants exploit computer systems in order to explore new forms of communication as they develop their new online cultures (Baym, 1998). Therefore, their impact does not determine the style of online identity expression but forms a socio-cultural context/ boundary in which the establishment of this expression takes place.

In a 'mind-space'[7] where user identities are continuously challenged, de-territorialised and fragmented, a new connection between humans and machines becomes a major part of the creative landscape of cybercultural technologies (Kennedy, 2000; Robins, 2000). Cyberculture thus provides the means through which the dialectic relationship between nature, culture and technology can be interrogated in order to find out how it produces a new type of existence; causing people to become more than just organisms as they transform into machine-organisms through this new connection with machines (Kennedy, 2000; Robins, 2000). Therefore as a relatively new anthropological domain, the study of cyberculture is concerned mainly with the above-mentioned relationship in which technology serves as an interface between nature and culture (Kennedy, 2000 and Escobar, 2000).

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[7] A cyberspace.

*2.2.3 Cyberculture and qualitative audience-reception research*

The anthropological study of technology has, up until now, been concerned with the dialectic relationship between technology and the social conditions in which it is created. It has focussed on examining how technology effects change in its surrounding social contexts to influence the cultures within as well as how socio-economic and political environments encourage for the development of certain types of technologies and the usage of such technologies in specific ways (Escobar, 2000). The study of cyberculture, however, as a new domain of anthropological inquiry, is focussed specifically on the techno-social nature of technology - the role of technology in this dialectic relationship that includes the construction of social cultures (Escobar, 2000). The fact that cyberculture acknowledges the dialectic relationship technological systems share with individual/group action/agency and wider social contextual structures, means that it lends itself to  an ethnographic approach to the study of this relationship. This is because ethnography is concerned with the studying of human action within its social and structural contexts (Strelitz, 2000). The study of cyberculture's conception of technological systems as techno-social corresponds with the realization of the importance of human agency brought about by the ethnographic approach (Strelitz, 2000). In this way, the interaction between human agency and technology: interactivity becomes important.

Digital games take the concept of interactivity further than do marketers of information technology. In fact, promoters of information technology use the term to refer to the extent to which a program reacts to the choices of the user (Mortensen, 2002). This is a form of reactivity rather than interactivity since the latter involves not only the user's interpretation of the game's interface, but also the interface's interpretation of the user's actions. So both parties respond to one another's actions on the basis of their understanding of those actions (Mortensen, 2002). Theorists have gone even further to challenge the use of the term 'interactivity' as a description of the gameplay experience, replacing it with a term they deem more appropriate – 'configuration' (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006).

This replacement is based on the notion that, unlike the reactive, 'point-and-click' interactivity offered by other new media such as the internet, the gameplay experience foregrounds decoding and learning as the user attempts to master the rules and system of a game's interface: "The quality of attention which these kinds of interactive processes produce is often described as 'immersive'"

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(Dovey and Kennedy, 2006: 8-9). Configuration is thus indicative of the dialectic relationship between digital games, as technological systems, and individual action. However, regardless of this development in interactivity within the digital games aspect of information technology, the dominant structure of communicative exchange between user and machine is still reactive (Mortensen, 2002).

## Conclusion

The first section of this chapter gave an overview of the important positions in audience-reception studies by beginning with an exploration of what are audience studies main concerns. It ended on the note that studying audience interpretations needs to take into account their relationship with the socio-cultural context in which these interpretations take place. After explaining arguments fundamental to the interpretative paradigm, I moved on to provide an introduction of cybercultural studies and the various perspectives of which it consists; this is where I acknowledge the dialectic relationship between nature, culture and technology.

# Chapter 3: LITERATURE REVIEW [Part 2]

## COMPUTERS AND THEIR GAMES

This thesis will be looking at the relationship between the features characteristic to first-person shooters, *Infinity Ward (2009). Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2. [PC game]. USA: Activision* in particular, and the preferences and pleasures of users – between the digital FPS game, as a technological system and the cultures that emerge around its gameplay. Looking at a group of computer-game playing students at Rhodes University, I am interested in discovering their motivations for joining the global FPS computer-game culture and how that culture is affected by the expansion of FPS games onto consoles. How does the message communicated by the game influence the users' development of a new gaming identity? And, how do issues of gender and race factor into this new identity?

In an effort to inform this study's attempt to answer these questions, this chapter will discuss a number of themes:

    3.1     Computer games as shapers of culture

    3.2     Computer games and technicity

    3.3     First-Person Shooters and Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

    3.4     Key reception analyses of computer-game cultures

## 3.1 Computer games as shapers of culture

The irreducible nature of digital games and their level of interactivity are reasons their gameplay by users is not regarded as reading or reception-only, but are rather akin to sport or play (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006). Hall's encoding/decoding model of audiences' relatively free interpretation of media texts within society's power relations (Morley, 1992; 1991; Grossberg, 1993) seems to apply here. Despite the high level of interactivity provided by digital games which allows users to actively participate in the creation of the game as they play, users are still required to submit

to rules which will limit their behaviour (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; Newman, 2002; Bogost, 2008). Therefore, these rules shape users' experience of a game but they do not ultimately determine it hence digital games' irreducibility (Marshall, 2004). The rules are a way for the game to present its producer's representation of reality through procedural rhetoric, a process which involves the making of an argument through the construction of a system of rules of behaviour rather than of words or images (Bogost, 2008; Marshall, 2004). Therefore, they attempt to shape the user's behaviour according to the producer's preferences which are communicated through, according to Bogost (2008), argumentation/'behavioural confirmation'[8].

The manner in which users engage/debate with these rules through practices/activities such as cheating and/or creating modifications for the game offers up different types of gameplay experience of both the rules and the game (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; Bogost, 2008; Marshall, 2004; Wright et al., 2002). This freedom of the user to engage through such practices is provided by the rules of the interface within a 'possibility space'[9] – as suggested by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman definition of the term 'play' as "the free space of movement within a more rigid structure" (Bogost, 2008: 120). One can argue that these various practices and activities, motivated by users' interpretations, constitute different cultures formed within and around digital games (Marshall, 2004; Wright et al., 2002).

This is because gameplay takes place in a game's world, a virtual world or cyberspace created by the game's producers (Marshall, 2004). Therefore, by this virtue, the 'magic circle'[10] in which gameplay takes place (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006) is not ideologically neutral; through the use of rules, it advocates a 'preferred culture' to which it expects users to subjectify themselves but since users bring, with them, their socio-economic backgrounds into the reception situation, their culture pre-reception debates and negotiates with the preferred culture through appropriation to

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[8] "A specific process whereby the expectations of a perceiver cause a target to behave in ways that confirm the perceiver's expectations" (Snyder, Tanke and Berscheld, in Yee, 2002).

[9] A free space of movement allowed by a game's rules, with which the user can use to engage the game-system or interface (Bogost, 2008).
[10] Refers to the game's world or cyberspace.

establish a new cultural identity (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; Bogost, 2008; Castronova, 2005; Yee, 2002). Winnicot states that

> It is in playing and only in playing that the individual or adult is able to be creative and to use the (his/her) whole personality and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the 'self' (Winnicot in Dovey and Kennedy, 2006: 33-34).

Similarly, Dovey and Kennedy state:

> In this reading, it is possible to argue that the computer-game player is in some way rehearsing another version of those interactions between (internal) subject and (external) representations which are at the root of the personality, as well as at the root of culture (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006: 34).

So by playing a digital game, the user is co-creating his/her gameplay experience and in so-doing he/she creates his/her own identity as he/she appropriates the rules and ideologies communicated through the game's user interface with those he/she is already subjected to prior to gameplay (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; Wright et al., 2002). Therefore, playing a game repeatedly reinforces this new identity and forms a culture by establishing emergent norms (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; Castronova, 2005; Marshall, 2004). Theorists acknowledge the importance of ritualised play and performance in both the formation of individual identity and that of communities. He states that rituals and play are sites of cultural affirmation (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; Castronova, 2005).

It is in this sense that Bogost (2008) argues that, although user engagement with a game's interface contributes to the forming of a culture/community through the establishment of ritualised play hence the building of norms and values, these values are primarily instituted outside the game (in-room and in-world) as they focus mainly on the act of playing the game as a social practice. This is especially the case when referring to LAN-gameplay groupings. Other theorists support this statement:

> Our goal is... to provide a set of careful descriptions of how 'in-game' activity is tangled up with activity 'in-room', and the wider worlds of activity that young

people inhabit. We argue that 'in-game', 'in-room' and 'in-world' are more permeable and blurred than the separate worlds view would suggest. (Stevens, et al., 2008: 43)

## 3.2 Computer games and technicity

Ritualised play is thus important in the process game players go through to establish themselves as a community with an identity as it is through their repeated use/play of a digital game that they reinforce their values and differentiate themselves from other communities. It is through repeated play that they build upon newly formed social and cultural relationships based on their attitudes toward the game they play as a technology they use (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006). These social and cultural allegiances formed through ritualised technological use contribute to users of a specific game developing an identity which separates their community from others around it – this identity is also referred to as technicity[11] (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006). Referring to the same concept, Turner offers the notion of *communitas*, which speaks about the firm feelings of belonging that users may have in group-based cultural activities (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006). As cybercomunities, video-game groups are influenced by socio-cultural factors and it is due to this that they are regarded as markers of different social and cultural power (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006). These factors serve as either closed or open doors enabling or preventing people to/from access/ing experiences which would provide them with technological competencies and thus allow them to join certain technicities (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006).

Since technological differentiation is central to the concept of technicity, the specific digital game being played, and the genre to which it belongs plays a role in defining a technic community. There are various genres/types of digital games and the production of each follows a certain, dominant/preferred way of reading and writing, of encoding and decoding – a certain literacy[12] (Gee, 2003). Each of these ways is caught up with and in social practices. Therefore, it is influenced by socio-cultural factors present in its surrounding context. It is in this way that the literacy of a specific 'semiotic domain' becomes part of users' emergent digital-game culture

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[11] Identities that are formed around and through technological differentiation (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006)
[12] In this case, the term is not limited to being able to read and write language/print. It also includes the ability to encode and decode images, symbols etc. in certain, historically and culturally facilitated ways (Gee, 2003).

(Gee, 2003). In the following section, I will discuss a digital game named *Infinity Ward (2009).*
*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2. [PC game]. USA: Activision*and its genre as a semiotic domain
in which users learn its literacy (to encode/decode) through its interface via gameplay.

## 3.3 First-Person Shooters and Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

A 'first-person shooter' (FPS) is a digital game in which a player engages with its system of
rules through a first-person point of view (Thefreedictionary.com). This allows the player to
experience the action through the eyes of the game's main character in an attempt to immerse
him/her into the game-world (Thefreedictionary.com). This action, which is what gameplay is
based on, takes place mainly through gun-and-projectile weapon-based combat and it is the
genre's main design element (Thefreedictionary.com). Gameplay takes place in a three-
dimensional (3D) environment thus making the games produced in this genre more realistic in
terms of the player feeling as through he/she is actually inside the virtual world, and the fact that
the world feels 'real' due to its somewhat accurate representations of elements such as gravity,
lighting, explosions etc. (Thefreedictionary.com). As 'shooters', FPSs' game-worlds or
narratives are often based on modern military themes in which the protagonist/player is part of a
group of soldiers fighting against an enemy army (Thefreedictionary.com).

This theme is what has made this genre of digital games popular amongst players; it is usually
the basis on which players are able to play together as soldiers of war – either on the same side or
against each other. The nature of a war theme, being based on the notion of one army/team
against another, is the reason the majority of FPSs are designed to have a multiplayer mode
(Thefreedictionary.com; Manninen, 2003). This is a mode in which players are often rewarded
for beating the opposing team by acquiring more points through killing all its members –
colloquially known as 'Death Match' (Thefreedictionary.com).

Another way in which this mode has been designed in many FPSs is 'Capture the Flag'. This
involves opposing teams attempting to penetrate each others' defences, steal a flag and return it
to their own base whilst defending their own flag. This mode is often the primary focus of FPs'
gameplay but even so, they do not completely abandon single-player narratives
(Thefreedictionary.com). Although games from this genre are increasingly being produced for
consoles such as the *X-BOX 360* or *PlayStation 3*, their most popular and appreciated medium is

the personal computer (PC). In fact, FPSs were produced for personal computers first before any other digital game medium (Gamefaqs.com). An example of an FPS which dominated the PC market before it went on to take over the console market, is a series entitled *Call of Duty* (Gamefaqs.com).

Currently, its latest instalment: *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, in under one year, has become the best-selling digital game in the history of the United Kingdom (Goss, 2010; Madway and Paul, 2009). When it was first introduced, the *Call of Duty* series placed the player in the centre of the Second World War hence expecting them to use weapons from that era in order to survive. This focus later changed with the series' introduction of the *Modern Warfare* sub-series (Gamefaqs.com). This time around, the player experienced war-related action through the eyes of a soldier in modern combat settings and was able to use more recently developed weapons and technology to survive (Gamefaqs.com).

Created by Infinity Ward[13], *Infinity Ward (2009). Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2. [PC game]. USA: Activision*continues the story of its predecessor, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Absolute Steve, 2009). Apart from the above-mentioned multiplayer mode which can be both competitive and cooperative, the game also consists of a single-player mode otherwise known as the campaign/story mode. In this mode, the player is expected to step into the shoes of various members of American 'Task Force 141' and fight alongside the rest of the members in an effort to prevent a war criminal named 'Makarov' (who is Russian) from implementing plans to start a global war (Absolute Steve, 2009). Every player around the world playing this game's campaign mode is expected to fill the shoes of an American soldier fighting against Russian soldiers.

Thus based on Hall's encoding/decoding model, the producers of the game are attempting to interpellate all players as 'Americans'. With the game being as popular as it seems, "The shooter game is likely to be "one of the largest entertainment launches of any media of all time," (Activision CEO in Madway and Paul, 2009) the widespread playing of this game is indicative of what some theorists consider the globalisation of culture; where the transfer of technology and its content from more affluent countries to less affluent ones leads to technological and cultural dependency (Nulens, 1997). Therefore, since developing countries cannot produce their own

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[13] An award-winning American video game developer and creator of the Call of Duty franchise (infinityward.com).

computer technology and hence digital games, they depend on developed countries to supply them. In this way, under-developed countries' own local cultures are replaced by those of the developed countries communicated through the technological content they purchase as they adopt the developed countries' cultural icons and superstars (Nulens, 1997 and Adeya and Cogburn, 2001).[14]

The audience of Infinity Ward (2009). Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2. [PC game]. USA: Activisionis regarded as mainly composed of young males (Madway and Paul, 2009), unsurprising if one considers that there are no playable female characters in the game. The game's world consists of various warzones and by not representing females in these settings, a number of theorists feel that it is contributing to the reinforcement of sexist ideologies (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 1998; Walkerdine, 2007). They argue that due to the gaming situation's lack of ideological neutrality, males and females/boys and girls/men and women have ill-proportioned representation in and access to the same computer games (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 1998; Walkerdine, 2007). One could argue that the fact that producers of Modern Warfare 2 did not adequately represent women in the game indicates that they assume that the playing of computer games is primarily a male activity (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 1998; Walkerdine, 2007). Huff and Cooper (1987) state that:

> Too often the study of computer games has meant the study of boys playing computer games. In fact, too often the very design of computer games for children has meant designing computer games for boys. (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998: 5)

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[14] This perspective is found by opposing theorists as technologically deterministic; they argue that new technologies obtained from more affluent countries do not have such a direct effect on developing countries' local cultures (Nulens, 1997; Williams and Edge, 1996). Instead, in addition to the technology's impact on a country's socio-culture, social and cultural factors already present in developing countries in-turn have an impact on how these new technologies and their content are used or understood. Therefore technology and its content shapes and is also shaped by socio-cultural relations – this notion is often referred to the social shaping of technology (Nulens, 1997; Williams and Edge, 1996).

## 3.4 Key reception analyses of computer-game cultures

A study by Wright et al. (2002) focussing on the social character of a community that had formed around an online-FPS game called *Counter Strike* was essential to my investigation of the practices which constitute a digital-game culture around *Modern Warfare 2*. As a modification of another FPS called *'Half-Life'*, *Counter Strike* is based on team-versus-team ranged weapon combat. So it is similar to *Modern Warfare 2* in that players are required to join one of two teams; in this case, the terrorists and the counter terrorists, and attempt to kill all the members of the opposing team through an assortment of weapons provided and tactics of cooperation or competition (Wright et al., 2002). To facilitate this cooperation and competition amongst team mates/teams, the game enables players to communicate with one another no matter which team they are a part of through an in-game chat system.

Motivated by the notion that a digital game cybercommunity is the result of the appropriation of offline social factors and the content communicated through the digital game, Wright et al. were concerned specifically with user-innovations in verbal dialogue and non-verbal expressions which they deemed a result of this appropriation – they called these 'creative player actions' (Wright et al., 2002). Creative player actions are essentially communicative practices that contribute to the development and institutionalisation of cultures around gameplay, so Wright et al.'s investigation into these actions greatly informed the aims of my research. To investigate these practices, they played *Counter Strike* together with their participants in order to gather participant-observation data which allowed them to notice variations of non-verbal interactions, and they examined log text files from 70 hours of gameplay so as to discover spontaneous player-talk in the game (Wright et al., 2002). Wright et al. were able to identify five general categories of talk that described the types of social interactions amongst players and how such interactions were policed. The categories are : 1) *creative game talk*, which includes innovative use of words, word-play, naming etc., 2) *game conflict talk*, which refers to cheating

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accusations/disputes, rules talk etc., 3) *Insult talk*, which involves annoyance talk such as taunting, explicit language (either racist or homophobic), 4) *Performance talk*, which includes competence talk such as personal boasts, statistics talk etc., and 5) *game technical talk*, which refers to game/computer technology-related matters (Wright et al., 2002).

Based on their motivation, this study paid close attention to the first category of talk since it revealed the complex manner in which the game is used to mediate popular culture and social interactions as players innovate and create new functions and meanings within it (Wright et al., 2002). The innovation of ways of talking specific to the player group and the game being played worked to create a sense of comradeship/community amongst group members (Wright et al., 2002). These theorists concluded that it was also the basis on which gameplay became a social act in a social world that is the gameworld (Wright et al., 2002). This means that players make the gameworld a social world through giving that world meaning by creating values/rules which shape communication and hence behaviour (Wright et al., 2002). Focussing solely on in-gameworld behaviour/actions such as logged chats that took place amongst players and symbolic communication e.g. logo design, avatar design etc., Wright et al. found that:

- While playing, users often pushed and redefined the boundaries set by the rules of *Counter-Strike* for their own pleasure (Wright et al. 2003). This they did by, for example, changing the games default features and customising them by creating their own maps and faction/clan logos in order to enhance their gameplay experience.

- That players would often organise themselves in specific ways influenced by the game. For example, since *Counter-Strike* is a team-oriented multiplayer game, players started congregating as clans and creating ways of recruiting people they viewed as skilled.

Another study by Kolo and Baur (2004) in which they investigated the reasons people spent a lot of time playing online games was also relevant to my research. This is because in attempting to find their answers, they structured their study around a number of questions which were based on the conception that online games serve as social spaces in which cultural identity is expressed: who are the players? When, how and why do they play? And finally, what are the social effects of the game in offline life? (Kolo and Baur, 2004). Kolo and Baur (2004) present a study of an online game named Ultima Online; a game in which players were able to be any variety of

characters e.g. miners, craftsmen, warriors, magicians etc. in a virtual world called 'Britannia'. Players are granted the freedom to design their avatars and customize their hereditary information such as where they're from and what name they have (Kolo and Baur, 2004). They have to survive Britannia's virtual landscape by using a set of abilities or skills their characters are equipped with, through acquiring wealth through Britannia's economy and joining small virtual communities/tribes known as 'guilds' by communicating with their members. Communication between characters is facilitated by a text-based messaging system (Kolo and Baur, 2004).

In line with the notion that there is a dialectic three-way relationship between the offline world, the online world and CMC in the virtual world, Kolo and Baur (2004) argued that in order to understand a player's actions in Britannia, the gaming situation[15] and what takes place online – these spaces should not be separated from social relations that take place offline. Their study discovered that two-thirds of the players enjoyed gameplay because of the social experience it offered via interaction with thousands of fellow players' characters in a virtual society/community (Kolo and Baur, 2004). Apart from the technical restrictions imposed on players' communities by the game's user-interface, player-communities had rules of their own. Some of them were explicitly formulated and established by an administrator whom they would refer to as the 'Lord British'. These would include orders pertaining to more serious behaviour such as 'no killing', 'no stealing' etc. Others would be non-codified and thus implicit, these would pertain to having manners when talking to other people and generally being considerate of others around in whatever you do (Kolo and Baur, 2004). The administrator rarely enforces these rules since characters that do not follow them are subjected to sanctions in the form of exclusion from guild and the benefits they provided such as protection (Kolo and Baur, 2004).

The study also found that the line between online and offline social interactions was blurred. This is especially since many players knew one another from outside Britannia; either from the offline world or from other game's virtual worlds (Kolo and Baur, 2004). In addition, players felt that their online actions had an impact on their offline socio-cultural life; some felt that through interacting with people they had never met before Britannia, they became more sociable and that it increased their self-esteem and confidence; others stated that the amount of time they spent

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[15] An environment in which gameplay takes place.

online effected changes on their offline interactions in the sense that they would have less time spent with their material friends in favour of their virtual friends (Kolo and Baur, 2004).

In his paper *'Computer Games as a part of Children's Culture'*, Fromme (2003), informed by the notion that emergent media cultures have a dialectical relationship with societal changes, looked at three studies that showed the extent to which computer games are used by children and young adults between the ages of 6 and 19. His aim was to better understand how children and young adults integrated their usage of computer games into their lives and relationships with their peers (Fromme, 2003). The first study he looked at I will not dwell on since I do not deem its findings useful to my study. The remaining two are German comparative studies; one investigating the use of the media amongst children of ages 6 to 11, and the other examining how young adults of ages ranging from 12 to 19 use the media (Fromme, 2003). These two studies together discovered, amongst other things, the following:

- That boys of ages between 6 and 11 prefer playing computer games with other boys more than girls of the same age like playing with other girls.
- That as they became young adults, girls grew less interested in computer games while amongst the boys, playing them remained a highly popular practice (Fromme, 2003).

Fromme (2003) used these studies' findings as a basis for a theoretical framework in which his own study, also undertaken in Germany, was grounded. Aiming to provide ethnographic accounts of children's playing of computer games, he interviewed only children aged between 7 and 14 years. His findings were as follows:

- The boys liked playing certain genres of computer games such as action and fighting while girls preferred puzzle-oriented types of games.
- That digital games did not compete with or hinder the children's participation in other social activities. The children found ways of integrating their playing of computer games in their daily schedules.
- In this sense, to children (mainly the boys), computer games just one of the ways in which children did something fun with their friends (Fromme, 2003).

These various research studies influence this thesis's study in a number of ways: Wright et al.'s (2002) research on creative player actions greatly informed this study about how gamers establish their cultural values through communicative practices. Since the aim of this study is to investigate a group of Rhodes University students' gaming community, the information provided by Wright et al.'s (2002) research provided me with a more enlightened take on how to accomplish that aim. For example, I now had a better idea of which questions to ask in order to get answers relevant to the aims of this study.

Although through methodological research, this study has acknowledged the importance of social context whenever one investigates social actions and the practices behind them, Kolo and Baur's (2004) research provided guidance as to how this study could consider and investigate the relationship between these students' gaming culture and their lives outside if the gaming situation. Upon being informed by their research that the line between the virtual and the material is blurred, this study could then focus more on how that is the case for these student-gamers.

Fromme's (2003) research addressed this study's enquiries pertaining to the fact that GameSoc's computer gaming subculture consisted mainly of men. This, it did, by highlighting some of the gender-related issues around the use of new media technology which this study could explore with specific reference to these student-games.

## Conclusion

This chapter picked up from the previous chapter's discussion on cyberculture and went on to discuss how qualitative research methods have been used to investigate the emergence of sub-cultures in and around new media technology before focussing specifically on computer-game cultures and technicities. It also includes a description of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2; the game I will be looking at and the genre of games it belongs to follows before it concludes with a review of a number of studies which were instrumental to this study's investigation.

# Chapter 4: Research Methodology

> The insistence on an interpretive understanding of the meanings and self-descriptions of the individual requires a methodology which emphasises the following: unstructured observation and open interviewing ... of cultural groups and communities and studying them in their natural setting (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 33, 270).

## 4.1 Introduction

The quantitative and qualitative research traditions have both been considered by many writers as paradigms (Bryman, 1988). That is, each tradition is "a cluster of beliefs and dictates which for scientists in a particular discipline influence what should be studied, how research should be done, how results should be interpreted and so on" (Bryman, 1988: 4). They are viewed as competing approaches to researching social reality, often disagreeing as to what counts as warrantable knowledge about the social world (Bryman, 1988).

This study uses a two-staged qualitative research process to investigate the types of relationships shared amongst members of a computer-game LAN group in Rhodes University as well as the practices and identity on which these relationships are founded. This chapter will be discussing the two stages of this research process, sampling procedures and modes of data analysis which were used in conducting this research. In addition, methodological issues will be explored, specifically the epistemological debate between quantitative and qualitative research traditions.

## 4.2 Methodological Issues

### 4.2.1 Distinct Methodologies

Epistemologically, the quantitative and qualitative research traditions oppose one another in ways one cannot overlook. Quantitative research draws on positivism and its belief in the indistinguishable nature of natural and social facts[16] and attempts to study the latter through the use of the natural sciences' research methods (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). This means that when studying social facts, quantitative research follows an empiricist theory of knowledge and relies on observations made by the researcher through his/her senses. Also, it adheres to a naturalist interpretation of objectivity as it distances the researcher, as a subject, from the people being studied and regarding them as objects, in an attempt to achieve a clinical, neutral and controlled study which can produce observable, measurable results that can be quantified, replicated and generalised (Babbie and Mouton, 2001).

On the other hand, qualitative research, with one of its roots in phenomenology, rejects the notion pertaining to the likeness between natural and social facts. It states that the social sciences should not study people by objectifying them as biological organisms; rather people should be considered first and foremost as conscious, symbolic and subjective human beings (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). This consideration has motivated the tradition's commitment to understanding human action by investigating and exploring the non-observable meanings, intentions, values etc. that underlie people actions through paying close attention to the subject's 'insider perspective' (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). I will now briefly discuss the qualitative research approach as this study will be focussing on it.

*4.2.2 Qualitative Research*

The characteristics of quantitative research mentioned above have served mainly as criticisms for the qualitative research paradigm. This is because qualitative research or interpretivism, takes a more critical stance toward social science research – a stance that is emphasised by its attempt to...

> ... account for the sufferings and felt needs of the actors in a social group by seeing them as the result of certain structural conflicts in the social order, and it seeks to explain these conflicts – and hence the sufferings and felt needs – by giving a historical account of the quasi-causal terms of the latent contradictions

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[16] This refers to moral norms, customs and traditions (Babbie and Mouton, 2001).

between the sorts of needs, wants and purposes which the social order gives rise
to and the sorts of (inadequate) satisfactions which it provides. (Fay in Babbie and
Mouton, 2001: 36)

According to Brian Fay (1975), the above-mentioned attempt is motivated by the qualitative
research tradition's recognition of people's actions as influenced by external social conditions
and a need to uncover the systems of social relations from which these conditions emerge
(Babbie and Mouton, 2001). Similarly, Bryman states that:

There is a simultaneous expression of preference for a contextual understanding
so that behaviour is to be understood in the context of meaning systems employed
by a particular group or society. (1984: 70)

Lindlof (1995) talks about practices and performances, stating that social actions carried out by a
society's subjects on the basis of their values and beliefs are in-fact performances underpinned
by practices. In this sense, people do not just perform in a vacuum; they do so according to rules
and regulations established by dominant discourses in society. These discourses are called
practices: institutionalised values and beliefs about how certain social actions must be
'performed' (Lindlof, 1995). Therefore looking at Lindlof's argument, one can understand why
the implementation of the qualitative research tradition's data collection methods is embedded in
the everyday lives of the people being studied: so that the researcher does not only describe these
people's actions (performances), but also understands the actions by investigating how and why
they occur (their practices) (Lindlof, 1995). This is in line with the critical realist position which
acknowledges the dialectic relationship between social actions and the social contexts that
envelope them (Deacon et al, 1999). Enquiring into why subjects perform certain actions will
shed light onto the systems of social relations amongst those subjects, this is the reason
qualitative research methods attempt to study social concepts from the 'insider perspective'[17]
(Bryman, 1984; Babbie and Mouton, 2001).

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[17] This term refers to the qualitative researcher's objective; to see the world through the eyes of the
subjects he/she is studying (Babbie and Mouton, 2001; Bryman, 1984).

This naturalism underpinning qualitative research methods ensures that the researcher does not influence the insider perspective in any way since it requires him/her to live according to the customs of the subjects being studied. As a result, the research process will be camouflaged against normal everyday proceedings thus allowing the researcher to obtain an insider perspective in its most 'natural' hence truthful state; unaffected by the biases of the researcher (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). Therefore, the investigation will often have to take place in the subjects' natural setting as it is in this context that they will least suspect that they are being watched. Not informing research subjects that they are being studied applies only if the researcher is doing participant observation. In cases where they are informed of the researcher's intentions such as during non-participant observation, the qualitative research tradition considers the subjects' natural setting as one which will most effectively minimise the effect of this knowledge on the 'naturalness'/truthfulness of the insider perspective (Babbie and Mouton, 2001).

Considering the above-mentioned goal of qualitative research, one has to acknowledge the fact that the researcher has already noticed the performance of social actions by the subjects being studied and that he/she aims to go beyond just observing and describing them to actually understanding their occurrence. This is because the general aim of qualitative research is to investigate the motivations behind observable social actions and the relationship between those motivations and the social context in which they emerge. Since the insider perspective is central to this understanding, and the researcher cannot assume/guess this perspective as there are too many possibilities since each individual has his/her own perspective; the researcher does not construct preconditions/hypotheses relating to any perspectives motivating the actions observed:

> Rather than beginning with an existing theory or hypothesis, the qualitative researcher begins an immersion in the natural setting, describing events as they occur or have occurred, and slowly but surely building second-order constructs, a hypothesis and ultimately, a theory that will make sense of the observations. (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 273)

This inductive approach to collecting data contrasts with that which is deductive taken by the quantitative research tradition because the qualitative researcher, unlike his/her quantitative counterpart, takes into consideration the fact that people differ from objects of the natural sciences (Bryman, 1988; Babbie and Mouton, 2001). This disparity is reflected in qualitative research's take on objectivity: instead of detaching him/herself from the values, views and descriptions of the subjects in question by creating a distance between him/herself and them, the qualitative researcher views objectivity as involving the obtaining of these descriptions in their most honest form (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). The closer the researcher is to a subject, the greater the chances of that subject trusting the researcher enough to be completely honest regarding his/her views on the research topic (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). Therefore, objectivity, in this case, involves the researcher getting as close as possible to the subjects in question so as gain their trust which will in-turn enable them to be comfortable enough to share their views honestly.

*4.2.3 The interview*

The interview is a popular data-collection method commonly considered to be generic of the qualitative research tradition. This is because it exemplifies the tradition's features as it enables the researcher to obtain subjective understandings of events (Lindlof, 1995). The researcher obtains information from subjects in a relatively informal interaction that resembles an everyday conversation between two or more people (Lindlof, 1995). There are a variety of ways in which the researcher can conduct this interaction, and each one is a specific type of interview that aims to extract, from participants, a unique type of response (Lindlof, 1995). These include; "in-depth, unstructured, semi-structured, intensive, collaborative, and ethnographic" interviews (Lindlof, 1995: 5).

Considering the purpose of this study was to investigate the performance of playing computer games via LANs by Rhodes University students, qualitative methodology was central to my data collection strategy as it informed my desire to uncover these students' attitudes and beliefs which inform their LAN-playing practice. Also, it is this methodology that has directed this study to taking into consideration, the social context of this practice as inclusive of Rhodes University and South Africa at large, as well as the dialectic relationship between this context and the

practice. In the next section, I will discuss the issue of triangulation which will be followed by an exploration of the various research methods used in my qualitative research design.

### 4.2.3   Triangulation

The type of triangulation used in this study is described by Denzin as 'Within-method Triangulation' (Flick, 1998). As a sub-type of 'methodological triangulation'[18], within-method triangulation involves the use of multiple methods which share a link with the same epistemological concerns. For example, the use of focus groups and biographical interviews as was done in this study. The next section will discuss the use of these two methods and the motivations behind that.

## 4.3 Method

For this study, I used a qualitative, three-stage approach to examining the type/s of relationship/s shared amongst members of a computer-game LAN group in Rhodes University as well as the practices and identity on which these relationship/are founded. The two stages were:

I.    Partial completion of the game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*. The purpose of playing the game enabled me to gain enough understanding of it to be able to maintain rapport with the research participants during the interviews to follow and to better understand their perceptions and values as a gaming group. Despite the fact that more gameplay meant more understanding of the game (Malliet, 2007), my completion of the game had to be partial due to time constraints.

II.   Focus group interviews conducted in late 2010. These investigated the students' social backgrounds, computer usage, their access to FPS computer games and the technicalities involved as well as their social attitudes to other gamers (of other FPS games and other platforms e.g. Playstation) and non-gamers.

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[18] Triangulation on the basis of multiple method-use (Flick, 1998).

III.     Biographical interviews conducted around the same time. They not only probed further into the focus group interview findings, but also investigated the students' changing computer game practices over time.

I will now discuss each of these stages.

*4.3.1 Computer gameplay of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*

Juul, Kucklich and Aarseth state that studying digital games involves playing them a number of times as this allows the researcher to better understand them (Malliet, 2007). In addition, Aarseth argues that the number of times or how long a researcher plays a game should be influenced by specific needs of analysis. There are three levels of expertise in which the researcher can become involved in gameplay[19] and each of them represent a level of understanding the researcher should strive to attain in-line with the goals of analysis (Malliet, 2007). These are as follows:

1. Superficial play: where the user plays a game for a few minutes,
2. Partial completion: where the user completes a number of missions but not all of them,
3. Repeated play/Expert play: where the user repeatedly completes the game at different levels of difficulty and mastery (Malliet, 2007).

In cases where one experiences time-related limitations which could prevent him/her from playing a game to the level of engagement the goal of analysis requires, one could complement the analysis by exploring secondary sources such as press reviews or player accounts (Malliet, 2007). This I did by looking at reviews and walkthroughs at a number of websites which included YouTube and IGN.com. This thesis's focus is not on studying a digital game per se, it is concerned mainly with the social relations hence culture formed through and around the technology. Even so, investigating audiences' interpretations of any text requires some level of understanding about how that text is influenced by socio-cultural factors such as the rules and conventions which govern the production of the text in its genre (Malliet, 2007). Siegfried Kracauer states that,

> In order to understand the meaning of a media message in its full depth and richness, it is not sufficient to study the manifest content that is communicated. In many cases, it may

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[19] An activity in which a person engages with the user-interface of a digital game.

be equally important to investigate the latent meanings of a message; meanings that are not explicitly formulated, but that are implied in the reader's interpretation (quoted in Malliet, 2007).


*4.3.2   Focus group interviews*

Since the Second World War, when they were used to determine the effectiveness of radio programs on army morale, focus group interviews were mainly used alongside quantitative methods for supplementary purposes such as assisting in the generation of ideas for hypotheses and the interpretation as well as designing of quantitative research techniques (Lunt, 1996; Berg, 2001). From the 1990s, the focus group interview gained more respect to become a stand-alone method in the social sciences. It is regarded as highly effective in the qualitative study of the social world because it enables the researcher access to communicative contexts of meaning-making such as conversations, public discussions and gossip, which would otherwise be inaccessible (Lunt, 1996; Berg, 2001).

Focus groups do this by simulating these contexts and allowing the researcher to uncover the practices according to which meaning is socially constructed through everyday talk (Lunt, 1996; Babbie and Mouton, 2001; Flick, 1998). To achieve simulation, focus group interviews involve the researcher bringing together a series of groups consisting of two or more people, with each group discussing a topic in the presence of a moderator (Lunt, 1996; Berg, 2001). Considering the fact that these discussions are simulations of everyday conversations amongst people, one can understand the dynamic nature of the groups involved. That is, if properly administered, focus groups will have a 'synergistic group effect' in which each member of the group reacts to what the other has said, leading to collective brainstorming activity whereby deeper and more meaningful insight into the subjects' behaviour is developed (Berg, 2001; Flick, 1998). Rubin and Rubin explain how this takes place:

> In focus groups, the goal is to let people spark off one another, suggesting dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one individual might not have thought of. Sometimes a totally different understanding of a problem emerges from the group discussion. (Berg, 2001: 115)

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In my case, simulated everyday talk allowed me to discover the subjects' motivations behind their playing of computer games together, and how those motivations came about.

I conducted a total of three focus group interviews with a single group of people with each interview taking place once a week. This is because the subjects had busy schedules due to the time of the academic year: the last academic term in which the majority of students write their final exams. Although the group initially consisted of six people, three of them could not make the remaining two interviews because of their academic work load.

To bolster the objectivity of this study by enhancing its validity and reliability, I made use of extensive field notes which involved me taking notes as data-collection took place. This allowed me to adapt the study to the ever-changing social worlds of the subjects in question and their perspectives (Babbie and Mouton, 2001).

Regarding the characteristics of the groups formed; does the researcher use survey sampling techniques to determine whether these groups should consist of people who know each other or of people who are relative strangers? Recent innovation in focus group design has been moving towards interviewing groups of like-minded people which have been 'naturally' formed in society, without any input from the researcher (Lunt, 1996; Flick, 1998). According to NieBen, this is because "real groups start from a history of shared interactions in relation to the issue under discussion and thus have already developed forms of common activities and underlying patterns of meaning" (quoted in Flick, 1998: 117). The group interviewed for this study was homogenous since it included people who were not only like-minded when it came to FPS gaming, but were friends after meeting through GameSoc in Rhodes University. They often spend time together partaking in other social activities aside from playing computer games e.g. watching cartoons.

*4.3.2.1 Sampling and recruitment of the group*

As mentioned earlier, focus groups interviews are often conducted on clusters of people who have in common, a practice which they perform. In this sense, choosing people who will form these groups is almost always a non-random process in which the researcher purposively selects participants according to already-set, abstract criteria developed on the basis of research

considerations and thus outside of theoretical consultation (Babbie and Mouton, 2001; Deacon et al., 1999; Flick, 1998). This is referred to as purposive or theoretical sampling.

Spradley (1979) discusses some of these criteria: *Thorough enculturation* which refers to the extent to which the participant has made the values and beliefs of a certain practice his/her own. As this process of enculturation takes time, this criterion is also concerned with the amount of time a participant has been performing the practice in question; *Current involvement* refers to whether or not a participant is currently performing the practice under investigation. Values and beliefs have a dialectical relationship with performances, which is why they both change over time. Interviewing a participant who 'was' performing a certain practice will only yield outdated information on that practice which will be useless if the researcher is more interested in current developments. Finally, *adequate time* refers to whether or not the participant has enough time to offer the researcher? Does the researcher have enough time to interview a set number of participants? These are questions which will influence people chosen as well as the sample-size (Babbie and Mouton, 2001).

For this study, and directed by its research question – I applied the criteria as follows;

*Thorough enculturation*: Although how long a participant had been a computer-game player was important, my focus fell mainly on his/her involvement with the rest of the group members. How long had they known one another and how does that affect their LAN gameplay? This criterion actually served me less as a formal standard along which I chose participants than a guide so the selection of participants was not as strict in this regard. The reason is because both types of participants: those who have been members of the group for long and relatively new members as well as those that had been playing computer games for long, and those who are new to it had important data to reveal regarding the gameplay dynamics of the group hence the relationships amongst group members during LAN gameplay. Therefore, the overriding criterion was that each participant had to be a member of this group of Rhodes University student LAN computer-game players.

*Current involvement*: Looking into the formation, maintenance and establishment of relationships amongst computer-game LAN-players in Rhodes University, the obvious and first criterion along which I would choose participants is that they would all have to be currently

playing computer-games with other people via LANs. In addition, they would have to be enrolled as students at Rhodes University because that corresponds with the aims of this thesis: to investigate the type/s of relationship/s shared amongst members of a computer-game LAN group in Rhodes University.

*Adequate time*: As mentioned earlier, the time of the academic year in which the data collection part of this study took place was not entirely favourable. This was the last term of the academic year when most undergraduate courses have their students write tests, assignments and course-mark defining exams; the majority of postgraduates are either also writing exams or nearing research deadlines by which their theses must be submitted. Therefore, through negotiation, the participants agreed to be available for my interviews once a week, and that was on the condition that competing calls on their time would take priority. I offered the participants cake and coffee every interview session as an incentive to make it every week. However, even with this enticement, seven participants were able to attend the first of the three interviews conducted but four of them could not make it for the remaining two due to academic commitments.

Once I had decided on the criteria for choosing my participants, I relied on the snowball sampling method for the actual recruitment. I looked to the Gaming Society on the Rhodes University campus to find potential participants. I knew there were members of this society who fit the criteria mentioned above because of my experience with this society as stipulated in chapter 1. After speaking to one person, 'Scion', about my research and my intention to interview him and a few more people he shares his enthusiasm of computer games with, I suggested he bring a maximum of six of these people with him to interview sessions. As mentioned earlier, Scion was able to bring six more people so seven participants took part in the first interview but four of those seven had to send their apologies as they were to miss the two remaining interviews due to their academic work loads.

*4.3.2.2 The interview setting*

I invited the participants to one of the rooms in Rhodes University's journalism department's building; 'The Media Matrix', where I would conduct these interviews, because I considered it neutral in the sense that it had no significance to the topic of discussion or any of the students either positively or negatively. The neutrality of an interview setting is essential because it

ensures that participants' expressions are not hampered thus 'tainted' by any negative/positive association they might have with the setting and according to Powell and Single, this allows for " frank, unhampered and, if necessary, critical discussion and expression of negative views" (1996: 501).

### 4.3.2.3 The moderator's role

As a moderator, my role was to ensure that the synergistic effect of the group, mentioned earlier on in this chapter, was not interrupted (Powell & Single, 1996). This is the point of the focus group method: for the researcher to observe the negotiation and production of meaning between participants around a certain topic through simulating everyday conversation (Berg, 2001; Flick, 1998). The idea behind the moderator making sure that rapport amongst the participants is uninhibited is based on the qualitative objective of obtaining the most truthful insights into these people's lives with regards to the topic (Berg, 2001). I also ensured participants that their confidentiality would be maintained.

### 4.3.2.4 The interview guide

Although I had sampled my interview group only on the basis of my research question, my immersion in the literature played an important part in my drawing up of the interview guide (appendix 1). The guide was useful because it ensured that the focus group discussions dealt primarily with those topics which were relevant to my research question (Berg 2001).

Given that these were semi-structured interviews, and considering the dynamic nature of the focus group, there were moments during discussions where I allowed participants to explore new unexpected sub-topics. It also meant that I sometimes probed certain issues that spontaneously arose in conversation. This usually happened in cases where these new sub-topics/issues were relevant to one/more of the sub-topics already on the interview guide and, in-fact, were a way to explore further, the older sub-topics. For example, although I had originally intended to focus on the participants' LAN-gameplay around the game *COD: MW2*[20], I quickly realised during discussions that, for the players, *COD: MW2* was not unique in its importance except for its characteristic as a multiplayer game. These participants generally identify themselves as

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[20] Refer to Chapter 2.

multiplayer-game players because the interface-design of such games best suites their need to play together. Therefore, *COD: MW2* could have been any other multiplayer game; they still would have played it by virtue of it enabling them to play together.

In fact, although participants spoke mainly of multiplayer games as a genre, they often compared different games within and across various sub-genres e.g. comparing *COD: MW2* as a multiplayer FPS game with other multiplayer racing (*Split Second*), FPS (*Counter Strike*) and strategy (*War Craft: DOTA*) games. As a result, I had to broaden the scope of the study from looking specifically at their playing *COD: MW2*, to their collective playing of multiplayer games as a whole because their playing of these games is based mainly on their valuing of playing together – the sub-generic characteristics of a game are not as important. This I did by probing more deeply into their spontaneous comparison of *COD: MW2* and other games mentioned above in terms of how each affected, positively/ negatively their LAN gameplay sessions.

*4.3.2.5 Recording the data*

Since I was to interview the same group of people, I asked them permission to audio-record their discussion of the topic in question at the beginning of the first interview session. In addition, I took down notes of any unexpected/unique information that I felt needed further exploration or was essential to answering the research question. I also asked that they introduce themselves using pseudonyms of their choice not only assure a degree of anonymity, but to enable me to identify them when I transcribe each discussion.

*4.3.2.6 Analysing and reporting the focus group discussions*

In reporting the discussions conducted and data obtained, I focussed on sections that provided the most insight into the practice under investigation. I made sure that my interpretation and representation of their perspectives and values was faithful to their expression of them. This I did by conducting member checks (Babbie and Mouton 2001) in which I went through my interpretation of the interview transcripts, which was represented in both extensive field notes and notes I wrote off those transcripts after the interview sessions, with all the participants. . These notes also consisted of already formulated themes for categorising discussions which were

planned with reference to the interview guide, but new themes and categories were formulated for discussions on topics that were not foreseen.

### 4.3.3 The biographical interviews

The reason I conducted biographical interviews, otherwise known as 'oral histories' (Berg, 2001) was so that I would be able to follow up on discussion threads that emerged during the focus group interviews, but could not be satisfactorily explored without unnecessarily disrupting the conversations. Although I could have probed more into these threads via in-depth interviews, biographical interviews, in-line with the critical social stance taken by the qualitative research tradition mentioned earlier on in this chapter, allowed me to investigate historical elements which would then shed light on the relationship between structural elements in the social order, the playing of computer games together via LAN by these participants and the values, beliefs and perspectives on which this practice is based (Berg, 2001).

Considering my interest in the relationships amongst these players in relation to their fascination with multiplayer computer games, I hoped to probe further the similarities shared by these participants e.g. their current formidable knowledge of computers and how they work, their current relative experience playing certain computer games as well as their accessibility to both these games and the computer technology to play them. How have these participants come to acquire these characteristics? And, how did/do these characteristics play a role in the formation, development and maintenance of their friendships? In essence, I wanted to investigate the dialectical interplay between these participants' LAN gameplay of computer games and the socio-historical context in which it took place.

### 4.3.3.1 Sampling and recruitment of interviewees

In-line with the reason I conducted biographical interviews mentioned earlier in this section, I approached the same participants that took part in the focus group interviews. Five out of the

seven of them declined being part of the research any longer because of work pressure   leaving me with two biographical interviews[21].

*4.3.3.2 Ethical considerations*

In their paper *Playing a Good Game: Ethical Issues in Researching MMOGs and Virtual Worlds*, Mckee and Porter (2008), using rhetoric theory[22] and qualitative research methods, develop a rhetorical, analytical framework termed "Heuristics"[23] aimed at increasing virtual-world researchers' efficiency in dealing with ethical issues encountered during their studies. Having noticed a general orientation in most published work to focus more on reporting their results, they argue that researchers should pay more attention to the data collection and analysis processes of their studies as it is during those processes that important ethical issues arise (Mckee and Porter, 2008). This argument is supported by Doucet and Mauthner (2002) who focus mainly on the data analysis process, saying that since it is usually undertaken by the researcher/s alone in their office/s, away from their respondents and other stakeholders in their academic environment (e.g. potential users of their research, other knowledge communities, etc.) to whom the researcher also has a responsibility, a high level of accountability is especially crucial during this process.


This study's data collection stage, as already mentioned in Chapter 4, consisted of three sub-stages: partial completion of a computer game: *Infinity Ward (2009). Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2. [PC game]. USA: Activision,* focus group and biographical interviews. The first sub-stage was my attempt to understand the respondents' computer-gaming group via participation, not in their specific LAN-gameplay sessions, but the overall computer-gaming culture. I believe that leaving this sub-stage out would have narrowed my understanding and limited it to the

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[21] Although it would have been ideal to have the other members of the group interviewed, the fact that these available two were friends with those who were unavailable for the biographical interviews made data collection that much easier. This is because, as friends, they had known those unavailable for some time now and thus could provide some information relating to certain issues raised during the focus groups by their unavailable friends.

[22] A process of logical persuasion in which two, or more, parties engage in discussion with the aim of reaching a consensus (Mckee and Porter, 2008).

[23] Analytical categories which assist the researcher in thinking about and exploring issues of interest (Mckee and Porter, 2008).

information I obtained during the focus and biographical interviews. This study was not only about what my respondents disclosed regarding their culture and identity, or about what I learned from their disclosure and the basis for my interpretation of their practices and justifications – it was also about what I brought to the research, my own comprehension of, and assumptions about the computer gaming culture as a whole – outside any influence from my respondents. This was an important ethical issue since I, myself, am a console-video game player and thus had certain predispositions regarding computer gaming. The above-mentioned authors all believed that acknowledging the researcher's own perspectives and their impact on, and relationship with how the researcher conducts his/her study, does not reduce its validity, but increased it by making its findings more credible (Mckee and Porter, 2008; Doucet and Mauthner, 2002).

The Ess and AoIR Ethics Working Committee (cited in Mckee and Porter, 2008) have acknowledged two established perceptions of the internet. One position views the internet as public and hence all of the information it possesses, the result of which being that it believes all researchers, as members of the public, have the right to access its information without any prejudice or restriction (Mckee and Porter, 2008). The other position states that information available on the internet or any other virtual world is produced by communities through their own rhetorical discussions on matters of shared interest. As a result, its public nature should be determined by them in accordance with their own cultural norms and values (Jones, 1998; Benedikt, 2000; Mckee and Porter, 2008). My conducting of the second sub-stage: focus groups, was informed, amongst other things, by the latter position. It is for this reason that Mckee and Porter (2008) believe that, in privileging community cultures and norms by virtue of the perception which informs my research approach, I should take a rhetorical approach to this study by negotiating between my own judgments and the cultural norms and values of my respondents with regard to what should be considered as an ethical way to conduct my research.

It was during these discussions during the first focus group meeting that the respondents, after being informed of what the research entails, decided they did not want their real-world names used in order to protect their identities, so we agreed to use their game-names as pseudonyms. Looking back, keeping their real-world names a secret is understandable since pseudonyms also play an important role in their computer gaming culture. These respondents, as computer gamers, did not only play with each other via LANs, they sometimes played with other people around the

world via the internet, and in most cases, online gameplay involves players who do not know each other's real-life identities – they often use game-names. The names, as the respondents have indicated, serve to protect players from others who have a more obsessive passion toward a particular game being played, and thus an increased chance that they may want to express any frustration toward another player outside of the game's virtual world hence becoming a potential physical threat. Similarly, using their game-names in this study serves to protect them from other gamers and non-gamers alike, who disagree with the views they have shared with me and the academic community in general.

The data processing/analysis stage of this study, I conducted roughly at the same time as well as after the data collection stage. Since I set up more than one focus group, I analyzed the data from the previous group-meeting so I could use those findings to update my interview guide for the following focus group. The process allowed me to trace back my steps as I moved forward, to be reflexive. Reflexivity is a way in which the researcher can establish a relationship not only with his/her respondents, but also with other stakeholders of his/her study e.g. other knowledge communities, users of his/her findings etc. because it allows them greater access to the research process through transparency (Doucet and Mauthner, 2002).This is how I was able to correct the misconceptions I had regarding the motivations the respondents had for playing *Infinity Ward (2009). Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2. [PC game]. USA: Activision.* I was able to change the focus of the study from the game itself as a basis of the respondents' culture, to the relationships amongst the players formed on the basis of playing multi-player games in general.

So I can safely say that my research presents no risks to its participants since I ensured that their anonymity was maintained throughout this mini-thesis. Also, that I have been accountable to the best of my ability. Considering the possibility that I might have missed something due to the limitation of my human condition, and despite the assured safety of the participants, this study may not be completely accountable and credible. Indeed, there is no such study. I can only say that it has a degree of accountability and credibility (Doucet and Mauthner, 2002).

## Conclusion

This chapter discussed the two stages of my research process including the sampling and data-analysis procedures that were used. I looked into my reasoning for using these methods and combining them in the way that I did with regard to the idea of triangulation.

# Chapter 5: Findings [Part1]

## 5.1 Introduction

Following the previous chapter's discussion on the importance of context, its relevance to this study's research process and its influence on the manner in which interviews were conducted, this chapter consists of my analysis of the findings obtained from the interviews that took place. To recap: the aim of conducting those interviews was to investigate the students' social backgrounds, computer usage, their access to FPS computer games and the technicalities involved as well as their attitudes towards other gamers (of other FPS games and other platforms e.g. Playstation/Xbox 360) and non-gamers. Information in all these areas was meant to give me a better understanding of the practices these gamers perform and the identity and relationships they share. Also, it would also shed light on how these practices were influenced by the players' social contexts.

Upon being interviewed, this study's group of Rhodes University students aged 19 to 22 gave similar responses pertaining to their individual and collective patterns of computer gameplay. Of course there were differences and these resulted mainly from the disparity between South Africa's third-world socio-cultural context and that of first-world countries in which these other studies took place as well as the fact that the latter of the above-mentioned studies focussed mainly on online WAN gameplay while this study looked mainly at offline LAN gameplay. I will go into these differences and similarities later on in this chapter. I thus used Fromme (2003) and Wright et al.'s (2002) studies as a reference for the some of the categories in which my participants' responses were organised. These categories also constitute sections along which this chapter is divided. They are as follows:

5.2 Gaming as a social and cultural activity

## 5.2 Gaming as a social and cultural activity

## 5.2.1 Creative player actions and the gaming-group culture

### *5.2.1.1 Pseudonyms*

New media theorists' notion of cybernetics: that social reality currently consists of two-way relationships between nature, technology and culture (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006) seems to apply here. As a sub-genre of cyberculture, this concept argues that the above-mentioned dialectic relationships serve as bridges between these three aspects of reality and have thus collapsed the barriers that once distinguished them from one another (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006). As a result, both the expression of identity and the lived cultural experiences of people are now more commonly facilitated by technological systems. In this sense, people are increasingly becoming machines i.e. 'cyborgs'[24], as they find new ways of exploring their humanity (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006).

This is what I saw to be the case in this study. As I had mentioned in chapter 3, I told the interviewees that they could create a name they would use for the time during which interviews would be conducted. They chose not to come up with new names specifically for the interview process and rather opted to use the pseudonyms they use when they are in the cyberworld i.e. on the internet or in a gameworld. See below:

> **Interviewer**: So you guys name yourselves differently when you play?
>
> **Scion**: Game names...
>
> **Shinni**: (Interrupting Scion) Everyone has a screen name that you use when you log on to the game or when you play so everyone sees "that one killed you". So if

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[24] An acronym for the terms 'cybernetic organism' which refer to any living being that uses both biological and technological objects (Definitions.net).

you're running around and all of a sudden you're dying, you see "this person killed you" just like (pointing at another participant) "Viper has killed you". **Viper:** (interrupting Shinni) Yeah that's what he sees a lot.

(Entire group laughs)

The communicative exchange above illustrates a point made by Manninen (2003) in his paper *Interaction Forms and Communicative Actions in Multiplayer Games*. Using the Communicative Action Theory as his framework, he analysed communicative and social aspects of online computer-game playing so as to give one a greater understanding of the interaction forms available to players (Manninen, 2003). He states that the term 'interaction forms' refers to any player's behaviour that is a result of his/her involvement in the above-mentioned relationship between cybernetic theory's three aspects of reality (Manninen, 2003). This behaviour is perceivable by other users and often takes the form of communicative actions amongst players (Manninen, 2003).

In this sense, 'game/screen names' can be considered as interaction forms. Considering the fact that within-game CMC is often limited to textual and verbal cues, players have had to find ways of expressing their identities from inside those boundaries. Game names are one of the ways in which players can do just that since they enable players to identify one another – they serve as users' 'faces' so-to-speak. Since each game name is meant to be unique, communicative actions taken in-game can readily be attributed to their source/s as Shinni illustrated in the interview section above. Viper's comment is another clear illustration as it implies that Shinni seeing "Viper has killed you" on his computer screen repeatedly means that Viper is better at playing that specific game since keeps on being defeated or killed by him. In this way, player-identities and reputations are often built upon communicative actions as a foundation:

> **Scion:** It also helps with the 'rise to fame' on the internet. Sometimes your character can become legendary like Leroy Jenkins.
>
> (Entire group laughs)
>
> **Interviewer:** Seriously, Leroy Jenkins is...
>
> **Scion:** (Interrupting the interviewer) He is famous for his war-cry: Leeeerrooooy Jeeeennkiiinns... (fading out)

**Viper:** I don't know about good gameplay or good skills...

**Shinni:** (interrupting Viper) more just one really big mess up that got his entire party killed.

(Laughter)

So Leroy Jenkins became infamous in the online-FPS multiplayer gaming sub-culture to such an extent that other players branded him with his own war-cry, and his infamy was based on an action he took that had bad results for his gaming group/team – it got the team killed by their opposition. It is the same when it comes to offline LAN-gameplay; despite the fact that LAN-game players often have to see each other face-to-face due to the technical and logistical requirements of setting up a LAN connection between computers, their face-to-face interactions, in which players commonly reveal their real names, often do not change the fact that their pseudonyms are central to their gaming identities in and outside of the gameworld. Shinni and Scion explain this below:

> **Shinni:** I've had several friends who I've met at LANs where you'd go and game for GameSoc[25]. I didn't actually know their names for about six months but I saw them like every second day.
>
> **Interviewer:** Are you saying that you knew only their game names?
>
> **Shinni:** Ja, I knew their nick names. I just didn't know their actual real names. They told me but I just forgot it.
>
> **Interviewer:** But they did not mind though right?
>
> **Shinni:** Ja
>
> **Scion:** It was sort of interesting to meet the person behind the character.
>
> (General agreement)

It makes sense that these players often refer to one another with their game names and not their material-world names even outside of the gameworld. This I say because they meet and socialise mainly at LAN-gameplay sessions so their friendships are often built on and developed according to interaction forms they practice at these sessions in and out of/around the gameworld. Stevens et al. (2008) refer to this phenomenon as the entanglement of 'in-game' activity with that of 'in-room' and 'in-world' activity. Klastrup (2009), talking about how

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[25] A term that refers to the GameSoc: a student organization on Rhodes University campus which consists of people who are interested in all types of games e.g. digital, card, board etc.

gameworld researchers should conceptualise the experience of 'worldness', uses an online game named *EverQuest* as an example to explore the notion of 'the suspension of disbelief'. This notion argues that when players enter a gameworld, they are willingly entering a universe of 'make-believe'. They are choosing to imagine that the simulation of the material world presented to them by this universe is true – to suspend their disbelief and pretend that it actually is (Klastrup, 2009).

The extent to which players suspend their disbelief and give more attention to making sense of the gameworld depends on how well the world's architecture and interaction with the players simulates the material world. In other words, it depends on how immersed the player is within the gameworld (Klastrup, 2009). As players learn more about the gameworld, they develop rules and practices of interaction which either reinforce or challenge those of the world itself. Therefore, they establish and maintain their own culture around their practice of engaging in that world (Klastrup, 2009). It is only then that players are considered to be experiencing the 'worldness' of the gameworld in which they play (Klastrup, 2009). In applying this concept to game names, these are often required of each player by the game when he/she plays a computer game for the first time. So they are meant to be used during gameplay and within the gameworld but players start using them outside of the gameworld even when they are not actively playing. This they do mostly in situations around the practice of gameplay. Shinni and Scion explain:

> **Scion**: At LANs, it happens all the time...
>
> **Shinni**: (Interrupting Scion) Ja, at LANs, you forget... people don't have real names. They have their game names and that's it.
>
> **Interviewer**: So it's like the game is both inside and outside basically...
>
> **Scion**: Ja, I think the worst conflation between reality and the game is... my friend, we'd been playing for twelve hours straight and there was Fanta next to his screen. He tried to grab the Fanta with his cursor.
>
> (Group laughs)

Therefore, the concept of 'worldness' also applies to these participants' experience of LAN-gameplay sessions. The fact that they use their game names not only to identify one another within the gameworld, but also outside of it shows the spillage of the gameworld into the material one – into the gaming situation. It illustrates the relationship between in-game activity

and that which is in-room and in-world and how players have developed their own values and strategies to approaching their practice of gameplay. According to Bogost (2008), these players' establishment of values and beliefs is also an indication how they have developed into a community, he states that "video game play could be understood as a 'community of practice'... a common social situation around which people collaborate to develop ideas" (119).

However, whereas Klastrup talks about the worldness of a specific gameworld, that of *EverQuest*, I found that these players often organise LAN-gameplay sessions to play a variety of multiplayer games, and that they often use the same game names for every one of them. When questioned about the centrality of game names to players' in-game-in-world identities, Viper and Scion discuss how their playing of multiple games impacts on the way they regard the player in relation to his/her game name:

> **Scion**: It was sort of interesting to meet the person behind the character.
>
> (General agreement)
>
> **Interviewer**: Are you saying that the game name is the character and the person you see face-to-face is – the person?
>
> **Viper**: Because we're playing more than one game and most games you get different characters but players still using the same nick names, the nick name isn't necessarily the character, it is the player himself.

Scion gave another example later on in the interview:

> **Scion**: I have been playing *Counter-Strike* online for five years competitively and I went by the name of 'Scope'. When I went to an actual lanning tournament in Durban, people went sort of like "wait – you're Scope?". And I said yes, and I'm like walking away with the prizes... I'm like "leave me alone!"
>
> (General laughter)

This means that there is no one gameworld that is central to the players' experience of worldness since they are playing more than one game. They are experiencing the worldness of multiple gameworlds. In this sense, I argue that the players are experiencing the worldness of a new world, a cybernetic world that is not based on any one gameworld but on the practice of gameplay itself. Attending LAN-gameplay sessions is itself the act of logging into this world whereas the games played at these sessions represent various interaction forms through which players can build relationships with each other. Further proof of this is the fact that during

gameplay sessions, players often disregard certain practices considered to be norms in the wider material world e.g. going to sleep or not playing digital games excessively. This was mentioned by Scion and Shinni at different times in the interview:

> **Shinni:** We have all-weekend LANs... you go there and you don't sleep...
>
> **Scion:** ... my friend, we'd been playing for twelve hours straight...

Therefore despite the fact that players physically exist in the material world, their values, beliefs and perspectives of reality are being influenced by the various simulations of that reality presented to them through the games they play. As a result, they start to critique these simulations as well as the dominant material-world discourses around various cultural values and essentially develop their own understanding of how to live. The interview extract above serves as an example of this; by going to LANs, players leave the material world and all its established understandings/discourses behind, and enter a cyberworld of their own making, where new rules apply to the way they conduct themselves – such as when they sleep. This understanding is often referenced from both the digital gameworld and the physical material world and, using it as a foundation, they begin to live in a cybernetic world wherein the connection between the digital and the material is constant. The manner in which they choose game names to use also exemplifies this fact: Levo and Tidus's explanations pertaining to how they got their game names show how these players are equally influenced by the digital and material worlds:

> **Levo:** My name is Love.
>
> **Interviewer:** So you feel it says something about you?
>
> **Levo:** No, mine was given to me by an ex-girlfriend.
>
> **Tidus:** Well, my name is a little bit more cliché in terms of how I got it. I have been gaming since Super Mario was like the shizniz and back then I was really into video games. It was like what I lived for and one of my favourite games at the time was *Final Fantasy*. And one of the characters in *Final Fantasy*... his name was Tidus. When I was small, I'd love the guy. He was like, you know how you worship superheroes like Spiderman?
>
> **Interviewer:** Yeah?
>
> **Tidus:** When *Final Fantasy Ten* came out... that's when like *DOTA* and *Warcraft* and all those games... and that's when I got into competitive gaming and that's when I needed a screen name and that was my hero at the time so...

Like the logos players created in Wright et al.'s (2002) study, pseudonyms are symbolic markers used by these players to express their identities to one another. The fact that they are often referenced either from face-to-face relationships in the material world or from other gameworlds and popular media related domains is illustrative of the cybernetic nature of their identities. The participants even revealed that they use their game names in other domains central to their relationships with non-gamers such as lecturers, family members, other friends etc. When asked why he had kept his game name even after he had broken up with his girlfriend, Levo responded:

> **Levo:** No, it was three years down the line when we broke up and I never got rid of it because by that stage... you've got all your accounts; everything is based on that name. It's a mission [a lot of work and effort] to change.

So to Levo, this name was an expression of his relation to his then girlfriend. As he has stated in an interview excerpt above, "Levo" is a name derived from the term "love". Pertaining to the 'accounts' referred to by Levo, the rest of the participants said they used their game names in various ways:

> **Interviewer:** For what other types of accounts do you use your game names? Is it only other gaming accounts?
>
> **Shinni:** My e-mail address.
>
> **Scion:** Mine... [laughing] my grade nine foolishness. My one G-mail account is Jonnodesc0pe since my game name at the time was Sc0pe.
>
> **Shinni:** It just becomes an identifying nick name you can use when you do not want to use your real name...
>
> **Scion:** (Interrupting Shinni) Originality like you can't have an account with your real name because there is someone else who also has the same real name.

E-mail address accounts are also important for one to have access to other networking accounts e.g. those offered by social networking websites such as *Facebook* and *MySpace*. As Levo mentioned above, the 'mission' behind changing his current game name for a new one is that he would also have to change everything that is associated with the current name. This is because, as mentioned by Shinni above, a game name is an identity marker therefore changing it is essentially redefining one's cybernetic identity. So in acquiring this new identity, one would have to go to great lengths to maintain one's relationships with other gamers since their

perceptions about one is directly linked to one's game name. As illustrated earlier, some gamers only know one other by game names so this is one of the issues to which one would have to attend.

Another issue would be the maintenance of relationships with non-gamers. Since these participants often keep in touch with the majority of the people they know through online accounts such as e-mail and social networking websites, these would also have to be altered which could require a lot of effort depending on how many accounts one has got.

*5.2.1.2 Conversations around games*

Bogost's (2008) notes that we should understand video-game play as a community of practice., He argues that by forming communities, digital gamers create spaces within which they can critique and comment on cultural values present both in and outside of the gameworld. This statement is supported by Fromme's (2003) findings that children often obtain useful gaming related information from their friends mainly through verbal communication. The participants explain that this they also do with their friends in contexts outside of the gameplay situation:

> **Shinni:** If you're friends with someone and you see them all the time...it's kind of funny... you kind of end up at the cafe, you sit down and the guy is like "Ah I had a great game last night online". Then you start going into strategies and then you start going into you know...

> **Viper:** (Interrupting Shinni) Like any new heroes that are out, like whatever's just developed in whatever game we're playing at that moment, like that'll be the conversation.

> **Scion:** Oh and big things that happen in the industry like Blizzard announcing that they're putting *Facebook* in their games...

> **Roman Prince:** They are?

> **Viper:** Yes they're trying to...

> **Shinni:** (Interrupting Viper) Ja, you could've gained all that XP from joining that Facebook group dude.

> **Roman Prince:** Well I didn't know that you had to join the Facebook group.

> (General laughter)

One can see that the above interaction began as an explanation to the interviewer by the participants about how they often talk about game-related issues outside of the gaming situation, but it suddenly changed into one of the conversations they were describing earlier. In their paper *Living a Virtual Life* in which they studied gamers' playing of an MMORG[26] called *Ultima Online* in an attempt to find out the motivations behind why they spend a lot of their time playing the game, Kolo and Baur found that the main benefit many players looked forward to was the experience of playing with other people: "About two-thirds of the players mentioned the potential to interact with several thousand fellow players or participating via ones' character in a virtual "society" as an essential motive to log onto *Ultima Online*" (2004:

Although unlike in Kolo and Baur's (2004) research, this study's participants did not actively state their motivation to play Multiplayer games together, I did get a certain understanding of their reasons for this from the discussions we had during the interviews. As I stated in chapter 3, this study was initially meant to focus on the participants' LAN-gameplay practices specifically around *COD: MW2*. The reason this initial focus was changed is because I had realised that these participants generally identify themselves as multiplayer-game players. In addition, they would often draw and compare their LAN-gameplay experiences from their playing of all these games, not just *COD: MW2*. Therefore, what seems to be most important for these participants is the social relationships they share around their playing of multiplayer games. These relationships consist mainly of communication in the form of conversations in and around the gameworlds the players explore together.

*5.2.1.3 Cheating and discipline*

In his paper: *The myth of the ergodic videogame: Some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames*, Newman (2002) states that digital games provide players with a highly structured experience through tightly controlled systems. Similarly Bogost (2008) argues that play should be understood as the creation of possibilities, by the player, within the more rigid architecture of the game. The player is said to create these possibilities by making and carrying out decisions that have significant consequences in the gameworld hence the architecture of the game itself – a process known as configuration (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006).

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[26]An acronym for the terms: Massive Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game (Kolo and Baur, 2004).

The concept of configuration casts some light on the high level of involvement or 'immersion'[27] digital-game play consists of by foregrounding the decoding and learning of the games' structures and systems by players. However, I argue that the above-mentioned definition by Salen and Zimmerman, which incorporates this concept, does not cover all the bases. In the interview excerpt below, Viper, Shinni and Scion explain how players often manipulate the rules and systems of the games they play to improve their gameplay experience:

> **Interviewer:** But I mean there are certain hacks[28] that you guys allow amongst yourselves right?
>
> **Viper:** In LANs you do get actual mods[29] that count as hacks but they can make a small LAN a lot more fun at which point the server allows you to activate them or allows the host to activate them and then everyone can use them. Therefore it just makes it more fun for a small LAN.
>
> **Shinni:** Look, like special modes in DOTA. You can get like automatically max level everyone and then just have fun.
>
> **Scion:** Or in a previous LAN where we turned the gravity up to really low so that everyone's floating and then if you drop the shield it would fly. So we were playing rugby in the game but using the shield. So we would jump and throw the shield and it would fly across the map and the other people would jump and catch it... a lot of fun, even though the game was never designed for that.
>
> **Shinni:** And then somebody cheated and then just shot you.
>
> (General laughter)
>
> Scion: Oh ja, that was later.

The above interaction shows that gameplay involves more than just the creation of possibilities within the boundaries set up by digital-games' rules. During gameplay, players also constantly push those boundaries through the use of mods as they search for new ways to exploit games' systems for a better gameplay experience. As Wright et al. (2002) state: "Play is not just 'playing the game,' but 'playing with the rules of the game'". What is interesting about this conversation was the distinction between mods and hacks/cheats. What the participants said in the above

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[27] The degree to which a player believes he/she is a part of the gameworld (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006).
[28] Players' jargon for cheats.
[29] Players' jargon for modifications.

interview extract illustrates that a mod can become a hack depending on the context of gameplay. When these participants agree to use mods so as to enhance their gameplay experience, these mods are not considered hacks/cheats.

On the other hand, if one of the players decided to use mods without having agreed with the rest of his/her LAN-gameplay group, these mods will be considered hacks and hence the player will be viewed as cheating. In this sense, cheating is not necessarily breaking the rules of the game being played, but breaking the rules made up and agreed upon by the LAN-gameplay group. Rugby is a sport played physically in the material world. The change of rules Scion referred to in the interview excerpt above reinforce what Baym spoke of: that players' creation of gameplay rules is greatly influenced by pre-existing social structures' rules which the players have made their own through negotiating amongst themselves - a process known as 'appropriation' (Baym, 1998). Therefore, the rules of the gameplay group created through this process seem to take precedence.

The fact that these players place such effort into their gameplay experience is illustrative of the level of immersion involved in their gameworld activities. Therefore, it also gives one an idea of the degree to which they have suspended their disbelief in order to properly delve into the worldness of the game. The higher the degree of suspended disbelief, the more 'real' the gameworld becomes for the players and in this regard, the more attached they are to their actions within it (Baym, 1998). Jones (1998) states: "There should be no mistake about the perceived 'realness' of the reality encountered online - internet users have strong emotional attachments to their on-line activities" (Jones, 1998: 5). Although Jones focuses more on on-line users, his statement still applies to off-line digital-game players since the on-line, internet experience and the experience offered by the gameworld, off and on-line, are similar in that they are both virtual.

The above-mentioned emotional attachments and the interaction amongst these players which includes the appropriation of rules from sources of influence external to the gameplay context both contribute to their feelings of being part of a group/community (Baym, 1998). After being integrated within the gaming-group's/community's culture, gameplay rules soon become established norms which players reinforce and protect (Baym, 1998). Shinni and Levo explain some of the ways in which gameplay-related behaviour is reinforced by player-communities during gaming LANs:

**Shinni**: They usually get reported and… even if you just go to the main chat channel and say "this person has done this and this in the game", you'll find that they'll get kicked from games a lot more often than anyone else.

Back in first term I played like five games in a row and in the first game we had someone messing around and he screwed up the whole game for us all… tried to join the other four games… got kicked out every time just because they messed that first game. So it does matter.

**Levo**: My favourite video clip ever is of one of the Johannesburg LANs and a guy is caught cheating and they literally just ripped all the plugs out the back of his computer, lifted up his PC above their heads, walked outside and threw it down on to the pavement.

It is amazing. That is how gamers should treat other gamers who cheat.

**Interviewer**: So do the other gamers often forgive the one who has cheated and let him play with them again during future gaming sessions?

**Shinni**: No. You won't get invited back to the next LAN, you won't be asked to come to LANs…

**Roman Prince**: (Interrupting Shinni) If you arrive at the LAN, you'll be kicked out. It's cheating like in anything else. If you cheat in an exam you'll get kicked out. You know, you go to a thing like this… it's of a competitive nature. You want go there, you want to prove yourself, you want to beat people. You don't want people with unfair advantages over you.

Although, from the above interview extract, one can get an idea of the manner in which norms are enforced and reinforced, what's more interesting is the variation in reinforcement methods between gameplay-lanning groups. As Baym (1998), states:

> Users continually reinforce the norms by creating structural and social sanctions against those who abuse the groups' systems of meaning. Groups have different norms about sanctioning itself. (Baym, 1998: 60)

Now focussing more on LAN-gameplay amongst themselves, the participants revealed quite different enforcement methods from the ones mentioned in the extract above.

**Interviewer**: What about on a smaller scale?

**Roman Prince**: We don't destroy computers for one.

**Viper:** At a LAN, if we catch someone cheating we'll be just like "dude".

**Levo:** I would be furious. I really would be furious.

**Viper:** Yes, you're not gonna pick up their computer and throw it on the floor...

**Levo:** I would not break their computer but if it was Roman I would ban him from my DOTA which we play like every day and I would never play a game that he was in – because it's just uncool. Except that's Roman and I forgive him but...

**Scion:** (Interrupting Levo) It also depends on the types of LANs, sometimes there are competitive LANs where there are computers up for prizes and the people who cheat at that... that's when you get that serious rage that we talked about. But at a friendly LAN you're usually like "please just get out" sort of thing.

**Shinni:** Well, you know, you don't initially catch them cheating and say "please get out". You catch them cheating and say "listen, just stop cheating. It's not cool, we're trying to have fun here" and if they keep going then we will kick them out.

Therefore, from what these participants have stated, there are two types of gaming LANs: those that are competitive and others which are friendly. Their difference in behavioural reinforcement is mainly based on leniency. Players seem to be more aggressive in their protection of behavioural norms during competitive LANs because these are LANs where the purpose of gameplay is primarily performance driven and the relationships shared amongst players are mainly adversarial. This is supported by the fact that prizes are often awarded to the best player of a session. In contrast, the purpose of gameplay during friendly gaming LANs is slightly less serious: to have fun. This does not mean that friendly LANs are not performance driven, or that competitive LANs are not meant to be fun, it means that friendly LANs focus more on fun than competition while the vice versa applies to competitive LANs. In friendly LANs there are no prizes to be won and they usually consist of people who share pre-existing relationships outside of the gaming situation – people who are friends such as the participants interviewed.

Therefore, the reinforcement of norms within a gaming group during a friendly LAN is less aggressive. Based on Baym's (1998) statement that CMC participants can share relationships with other participants, I argue that the relationships between participants during these two types of LANs are also instrumental to the way those who abuse group norms are sanctioned. The former of the two interview extracts above shows Roman Prince comparing competitive LANs to an exam-writing session; this illustrates the formalised, professional nature of such a gathering –

all the participants who arrive at this type of a LAN come as competitors who sometimes have never met in the physical world. On the other hand, friendly LANs consist of people representable by these participants: people who are friends even outside the gaming situation and thus whose friendships influence how they would treat one of their own if he/she cheated. Levo's indecisiveness with regard to how he would treat his friend, Roman Prince, if he cheated in the interview extract above is an example of this influence.

This tendency for players to make up their own rules of gameplay coupled with their expression of self-identity through game-names they 'create' and the gameplay practices they establish alludes to the greater degree of media personalisability enabled and facilitated by new media technology (Hills, 2009). The fact that new media is increasingly becoming a central characteristic of people's environment shows that digital culture is closely linked to forms of self-identity (Hills, 2009).

The next chapter pays greater attention to the context in which these participants have been expressing their identity.

# Chapter 6: Findings [Part 2]

Picking up from where Chapter 5 left off, this chapter will be focussing more on the relationship between the participants' culture and the social context in which it is embedded. It is organised into the following themes:

6.1 Perceptions of Rhodes University as a socio-cultural gaming environment

      6.1.1 Platform war

      6.1.2 Gender and identity in gaming

6.2 Perceptions of South Africa as a socio-cultural gaming environment

## 6.1 Perceptions of Rhodes University as a socio-cultural gaming environment

*6.1.1 Platform war*

As established in chapter 2, users form new social and cultural allegiances on the basis of shared attitudes towards new technologies they ritually use (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006). According to Wilbur (2000) these allegiances can be identified as communities of practice as they include relations between people around common ideas and identities. The ritual usage of new technologies is illustrative of technophilic transformations which contribute to the emergence of aesthetic and functional cybernetic changes to the human body hence making it more cyborg-like (Tomas, 2000). Since each community will base its practices such as its ritualised use of technology on its own shared ideas, they will all use new technologies in different ways and thus experience varying degrees of cyborg transformations (Tomas, 2000). Therefore, different types

of cyborgs will emerge and in this sense, so will diverse identities that are as dissimilar to one another as are material-world ethnic identities (Tomas, 2000). Since these identities are not of the material world alone, but are also a part of cyberspace through the advent of new technologies, they are known as technic identities or technicities (Tomas, 2000; Dovey and Kennedy, 2006).

The way that Rhodes University gamers evidently differentiate themselves, and are differentiated from non-gamers, as explained by Shinni in the previous section, is based on their playing of digital games through the manner in which they ritually use computer technology. Non-gamers also use computer technology, but for reasons other than gaming and it is based on this variation in the usage of the same technology that different technicities emerge. Another example of this phenomenon is the manner in which the participants in question for the purposes of this study – as gamers, differentiate themselves from other types of gamers:

> **Viper:** That's also the fight between computer players and 'consoletards'.
>
> (Entire group says in concert: "consoletards")
>
> **Levo:** Console players.
>
> **Viper:** [Pointing at the interviewer] He's a consoletard, just so everyone knows...
>
> (Group generally surprised)
>
> **Interviewer:** Do any of you guys play console sometimes.
>
> **Tidus:** Yeah, I play *Final Fantasy*...
>
> **Viper:** (Interrupting Tidus) He used to be a consoletard and then I brought him to the right side...
>
> **Tidus** (Interrutping Viper) Ja but I'd still play console if I had the chance like...
>
> **Viper:** (Interrupting Tidus) [Jokingly] Don't admit to it, don't admit to it...
>
> **Tidus:** (Interrutping Viper) I'm not saying that I support console, I'm just saying that there's some console games I am willing to play.

Based on the exchange between Tidus and Viper, Tidus is now a part of this gaming group by virtue of a decrease in his playing of console games. This shows that this group of participants identify themselves as computer-game players in opposition to the practice of playing console games – as illustrated by the term 'consoletard', given by computer gamers to anyone who

prefers console over computer games. This term, is linked to 'retard' which according to the Chambers Concise Dictionary refers to "a person of low intelligence" (2004: 1029). It is derogatory as it implies that, on the basis of their preference, console players are somewhat stupid in comparison to computer players. The reason I identify this antagonism as one between two technicities is because it is based on more than just affective preferences for one platform over another; it is also based on the technical capabilities which characterise each platform and the degree to which they transform one's life for the better – technological differentiation (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006).

> **Interviewer:** (At Tidus) Ok, you came from consoles. You said you still actually play both, so you're basically on the fence right?
>
> **Shinni:** Fence-sitter.
>
> **Tidus:** No I'm not a fence-sitter.
>
> **Interviewer:** You're just on both sides.
>
> **Tidus:** I'm in both yards, ja.
>
> **Viper:** He just does not want to call himself a consoletard around us. [Jokingly] He knows it's a bad idea.
>
> **Interviewer:** So you guys are [exclusively] PC[30] gamers right?
>
> **Scion:** I do have a console. I did buy an X-Box this year.
>
> **Interviewer:** But then is PC still your main focus?
>
> **Viper:** Yes, one of the only reasons I bought the X-Box is *Guitar Hero*.
>
> **Tidus:** The same with me. I'm also a PC fan-boy it's just that I'm not so against console... like I don't call them consoletards. I'm not against the console but most of my games I get on the PC.
>
> **Interviewer:** Ok but why do you choose to get most of you games on PC?
>
> **Shinni:** They get pirated more easily and the games are cheaper.
>
> **Tidus:** Unfortunately that is one of my reasons. The other one being that I actually have a very good PC. My only console... I have a PlayStation 2... I don't have a PlayStation 3 or the X-Box 360 so I can't really play the latest console games – so it's more about accessibility.

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[30] An acronym for the terms 'personal computer'.

**Roman Prince**: The reason that PC is better than console. One: you get a console that comes out; games are made for that console. As soon as that console becomes obsolete and you will have a new console, suddenly if you want to play the newer games: one: you'll have to buy a new console and two: then buy those games. So that... it's very, very expensive. Or you can take all that money and buy a PC...

**Scion**: (Interrupting Roman Prince) Which you can use for more than just gaming...

**Roman Prince**: Ja, that's very important. But also, now you have access to every game ever made because they can all be played on the newer computers.

**Scion**: But wait, *Dungeon Keeper 1* from 1995 does not work on *Windows 7*.

**Viper**: Yes it does.

**Roman Prince**: You can get emulators to make it work.

**Viper**: You can always get something to do it.

**Roman Prince**: Then, you can also get emulators to play all the console games if you wanted to, and another important thing is: a console comes, you buy your console so brand new, amazed by the graphics. Two years later, you're looking at computers and their graphics are ten times better and you're stuck there while the person that bought their computer at the same time you bought your console has now upgraded, replaced their graphics cards...

**Tidus**: (Interrupting Roman Prince) Counter-argument. If you're buying a console... well the PlayStation 2 lasted longer than four years before the PlayStation 3 came out. You buy a PlayStation 2 and for that many years, you can just buy a game and it will work on you PlayStation. With the PC, you have to be constantly upgrading. Like my PC cost a lot of money...

The constant comparison of the technical abilities of each platform in the above discussion is indicative of the technological differentiation taking place within this group of gamers. Although Tidus does admit that he is not against the console platform and like Scion, will actually play it for some of its games that either do not work so well or are not available on the PC, for example *Guitar Hero*, he still prefers the PC over the console because, for him, it has more technical advantages. In this way, together with the rest of the gaming group, their identity as computer-game players is technic in the sense that it differentiates them from console gamers and non-gamers on the Rhodes University campus.

*6.1.2 Gender and identity in gaming*

In their book which examines the relationship between gender and the computer-gameplay culture, Cassell and Jenkins (1998) state that the domination of masculinity within this culture stems from patriarchy's establishment and continued reinforcement in the new media technology industry. New media technology reinforces patriarchy by representing its dominant gender roles through telling stories with rescue-plot structures that have male heroes and female victims (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998). In this way, they represent women and feminism mainly in positions of weakness. The authors note that "Women rarely appear in them, except as damsels requiring rescue, or rewards for successful completion of the mission" (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998: 7).

This is in accordance to Rheingold's claim mentioned earlier that the advent of new technology is based on a pre-existing patriarchal story-telling culture (Robins, 2000). As a result, boys are often viewed as more suitable to use new media technology than girls. Stereotypically, they are considered as more enthusiastic and skilled in the handling of technology than girls and hence would have more power within the field/discipline by way of having more access to using the technology (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998). Due to these social relations between the two genders around new media technology, boys and girls have been socialised differently, the result of which has been supplied by empirical studies conducted mainly by market researchers: a binary opposition between the sexes on the basis of likes, dislikes and gameplay skill (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998).

The participants explain, in the interview extract below, how this result has manifested itself within the Rhodes University gaming culture:

**Interviewer**: Apparently, though, the majority of gamers in the world are women.

(A brief moment of silence)

(Group then breaks out in laughter)

**Roman Prince**: There are those that claim to be women...

**Viper**: (Interrupting Roman Prince) There are no women on the internet. There are no actual women on the internet.

**Levo**: I don't know where you heard this but there are no women on the internet. Even one of the girls in our sister residence that plays with us like every day...

she's not a women. As soon as we go on and we're talking, you know, she becomes just another dude.

**Scion**: Everyone considers everyone male, you know. You don't announce that you're a woman because either you're gonna get hit on by a very desperate guy...

**Shinni**: (Interrupting Scion) (laughing) No one is going to believe you.

The participants' disbelief in the presence of 'actual' women on the internet i.e. women who use new media technology is illustrative of the above-mentioned patriarchal binary division between the genders – the perception that women are not interested in, capable or even suited to use computers for specific 'male-oriented' functions. It is understandable that these participants would share such a perception since, as stated in chapter 1: the majority of GameSoc's computer-gaming sub-community members are male. Based on this disbelief, everyone using a computer for gaming purposes is considered male by default depending on the types of games being played and the level of skill displayed. This is what Levo meant, speaking about one of his female gaming friends in the interview extract above: that as she plays with them, she displays an amount of skill considered average for most male gamers so, due to her understanding of the game[31], they are able to talk to her and treat her like they would any other male gamer - see below:

**Interviewer**: Guys, what about COD: MW2? Are there any women you who play that game?

**Scion**: No women.

**Viper**: Yeah, I don't know any woman that plays that game eh.

**Levo**: Girls generally don't go for fast action things because... I don't know.

**Shinni**: Most girls don't go for FPSs. They do go for some of the fast-paced action stuff like car games but they don't like... [Inaudible]

(Group all talks at once)

**Roman Prince**: But let's be honest, how many girls are really, really good at a game? In all honesty here, I can give only one that's like an older brother.

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[31] The participants regard her understanding of the game *DOTA* as incredible because she is a woman and this game is mainly played by men on the Rhodes University campus.

**Viper**: Yeah, I know but Lepaste's still moderate.

**Levo**: But she... for a girl, she's whoa!

**Shinni**: She is better than most guys that... [Inaudible]

(Group all talks at once)

**Interviewer**: But wait guys. What game is she good at?

**Roman Prince**: *DOTA*. She's like the only girl I've ever seen play DOTA – at all

The last statement by Roman Prince further illustrates the patriarchal nature of the Gaming Society's computer-gaming sub-community. As I will explain further down in this chapter, it also shows how Rhodes University's social culture was central to the shaping of these participants' masculine perception of women in relation to the practice of gaming. Due to the new media industry's continued reinforcement of the masculine as more technically adept than the feminine, and the gender relations that result from that which then minimise girls'/women's access to new media technology, in this case computer games – as they grow up, young women are socialised in such as way that makes them lose interest in computer games, or even attain a negative view of them (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998). This is mainly due to the fact that their usage of computers is often restricted to formal educational contexts like schools wherein they are not allowed to play games. As a result, they do not get to use the technology informally where they can explore other uses of the technology (Fromme, 2003). Thus many of them do not play computer games and hence are not interested in joining gaming communities such as GameSoc, leading to these communities mainly being filled with their male counterparts.

> In this age group [12 to 19 years old], playing computer games is the most popular activity for boys, but not for girls. The same difference does not exist in the 6 to 13 age group [a group from a different study hence sample] where playing computer games (alone) is the most popular kind of PC use for boys and girls. This might lead to the following hypothesis: girls lose some interest in computer games when they get older and turn towards the more "serious" types of PC use. Boys, on the other hand, mainly use the PC as a "game machine" throughout their childhood and teenage years. (Fromme, 2003)

Below is a discussion on these negative perceptions young women tend to have as a result of their social backgrounds in relation to computers and their games:

> **Interviewer:** Why is it you find that people are undercover gamers[32]?
>
> (All the participants speak at once)
>
> **Scion:** (inaudible)... particularly women. Fickle, fickle girls. They go "Oh, you're a gamer?! Shouldn't you be growing up?" And I'm like shouldn't you stop drinking?
>
> (Entire group laughs)

Based on what Scion states, some male gamers at Rhodes University hide their enthusiasm in games so that they are not stigmatized as childish, especially by other female students. The fact that female university students on the Rhodes University campus are generally seen by these gamers to be not interested in playing computer games and deem them as juvenile corresponds with findings obtained from one of three studies Fromme (2003) discussed in his paper mentioned earlier on in this chapter. Focussing mainly on boys and girls aged 12 to 19 years; this study found that as they got older, playing computer games became less popular with girls than with boys (Fromme, 2003). This phenomenon is explained by Cassell and Jenkins (1998) as they state that girls' interest, of lack thereof, is a result of the above-mentioned relations of power around gender roles and their continued reinforcement through representation within computer games.

The dominant social culture lived out by Rhodes University students involves practices that include high consumption of alcohol mainly at get-togethers such as clubs and parties. This is shown by the University's Dean of Students' Office's various attempts to repress alcohol-related behaviour by way of marketing anti-drinking messages around the campus and challenging student organisations to organise alcohol-free events. In my experience as a student on campus, exclusion from any of these practices is deemed as anti-social, and this is understandable since, due to the fact that the majority of the student body is involved in these practices, it is substantially more difficult to meet people if one does not partake in these alcohol-related

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[32] People who do not want to publicly reveal that they are gamers.

activities. This negative perception of gaming is also encouraged by stereotypical views of gamers as addicted, leading them to be sociopathically isolated and hence potentially dangerous people (Cover, 2006).

According to Cover (2006), the view of gaming as addictive is the result of critics applying the 'transference of addiction' argument to the practice of gameplay. This argument compared computer gaming to drug usage, stating that they both have addictive qualities because they often encourage repetitive usage, are escapist in nature and that the more time one spends playing computer games is similar to drug dependency;

> Either way, any concept of addiction involves a notion of behaviour and a desire for or experience of repetition. Addiction is sometimes presented as an experience of moral disorder, a physical failing, a social failing, or as an infectious disease that must be contained or monitored for fear of spreading addiction from one body to another. (Cover, 2006)

He also states that computer games are usually targeted by addiction rhetoric because they are new media, and being 'new', they challenge existing discourses in society by bringing change to established social practices and hence bring about anxieties around new media technology's desired role in society (Cover, 2006). Already established, non-interactive social practices such as reading print now compete with new digital practices such as web-based social networking and computer gaming – online or via LANs. The former is legitimised as part of 'higher culture' in comparison to the low popular culture forms epitomised by new media technology. Therefore "compulsive reading is exempt from calls of addiction – though there may well be grounds for the application of addiction rhetoric to some readers..." (Cover, 2006).

The notion of transfer in computer gameplay refers to "taking what you have learned in one context and transferring it to another" (Stevens, 2008: 41). Stevens (2008) mentions two sides of a debate around this notion: on the one hand, there is the positive view of computer gameplay which states that it contributes to the production of new cultures through identity formation and new ways of learning (Stevens, 2008). A more critical view considers the playing of computer games as detrimental to players' social development as it consumes a lot of their time thereby preventing them from socialising, causing them to behave in an antisocial manner (Stevens,

2008). I argue that the exchange between Scion and the girls he talked about reflects (it would only be influenced by such debates if he was aware of them) such debates around the playing of computer games. By referring to Scion's childish nature due to his interest in computer games, those girls are implying that he is socially immature. On the other hand, his opposition to their perception reflects a perspective similar to the positive view of the transfer debate:

> **Interviewer**: And you say that you know other people who are gamers like you but they also go out?

> **Shinni**: I don't really know that many 'shut-in' gamers. Most of my friends who are gamers are extremely social people.

> **Interviewer**: Do you think that whenever people say that once you play games and do not go out, you're anti-social is necessarily true?

> **Shinni**: A lot of non-gamers tend to apply that generally to people who do not go out. I don't get that applied it to me because people meet me and we go out and do things so they go "Ok, he's not one of those" but they do apply it to some of the people that I know who don't go out. But they're not anti-social people; these are the gamers that even if they're not out, there might be four/five people at someone's place with a hubbly just chilling out. So it's not that they're anti-social, it's just that they do not go out.

> And a lot of people who don't go out are those that play Dungeons & Dragons or, you know, that sort-of role-playing type of gamer which means that a group of five of them would gather to play a game anyway – socially. Playing role-playing games, it's not like you arrive, you play, you go away. It's you arrive, you chat, you say "how was your week?" you know, "What are planning to do with your character?" You find out about people and then you play and once it's done it's like "Yoh that was hectic" and you laugh about the session and have some fun and then you go.

So on the Rhodes University campus, people who do not 'go out', that is, attend the alcohol-related activities mentioned earlier are identified by those that do attend as anti-social. As Shinni states above, there are a number of gamers who do not partake in these activities but the stigma attached to them regarding their lack of social abilities is incorrect. They are as social as other students, gamers and non-gamers alike who attend the above-mentioned alcohol-related activities since their LANs, which they tend to have when everyone else goes to clubs and parties, are social events in their own right. One could argue that the stigma attached to gamers as anti-social is not the result of whether or not they socialise, but that of non-gamers and undercover gamers not wanting to socialise with them due to the dominant perception of the practice of digital

gaming as childish. Below, Viper and Shinni explain how he manages to maintain his friendships with non-gamers:

> **Viper**: Whenever we talk about games around our non-gamer friends, they usually all just sit there and go [mimicking a bored, uninterested face] "uh-huh – sure"…
>
> **Shinni**: (Interrupting Viper) No they don't really. Like half of them… if they're in a big circle and you're in the middle they kind of just go [mimicking movement from one spot to another with his hands] "Bzzzzt" over there. And then you just sit there and you go "where did everybody go?"

Based on this explanation, non-gamers who socialise with gamers do so on the condition that the gamers do not talk about gaming-related subjects. If they did, the non-gamers would move away from them and stop socialising with them. In this way, the speaking about games by gamers would be considered anti-social behaviour as it is not socially accepted by non-gamers and undercover gamers. This shows that these participants have found a way to relate to non-gamers in their social context as well as how non-gamers' negative perceptions about their practice have influenced it in various ways. In this type of social environment; where gamers, despite having non-gaming friends, often have to hide their gaming identity from them by suppressing their enthusiasm – the GameSoc served as a space where they fully express their interests away from non-gamers who would discriminate against them. It is a community that encapsulates Rhodes University's gaming culture by accepting gamers from different technicities and allowing them to meet and support one another by forming their own technic sub-communities – one of which is represented by the participants interviewed in this study: a computer gaming sub-community.

Even though this is the case, the technic sub-communities that develop within GameSoc have certain requirements of those who would like to join them. Since they are formed around the usage of a specific technology, having access to that technology is of principal importance. In my case, I did not have access to a computer that had the necessary capability to play the games they played so I could not join in on the computer gamers' Lanning session during the GameSoc event I mentioned in chapter 1. In essence, GameSoc brings together people from the same gaming-related technicities, in this case, students who have playing computer games for most of their lives and hence have no problem accessing the technology and meeting their technic community's 'entry requirements'.

## 6.2 Perceptions of South Africa as a socio-cultural gaming environment

Convergence, that is: "the coming together, regardless of the technological platform, of formerly separate communication realms such as audiovisual media, informatics and telecommunications" (Van Audenhove et al., 1999) has revolutionized the global communications landscape. This process of 'coming together' has been facilitated by both digitisation and deregulation (Van Audenhove et al., 1999). The former has enabled the combination of different media types such as graphics, video, text etc. for more efficient communication, while the latter refers to efforts by a society's government to ensure, through policies such as the liberalisation of local markets, that new multimedia services brought in by external sources will diffuse into that society's every aspect thereby forming a national information system (NIS) (Van Audenhove et al., 1999).

So far, I argue that there is no such thing as an NIS that has infiltrated every part of any society since each society has its own issues with reference to the digital divide. However, nations that show the greatest progression in this respect are those that are considered as developed (Van Audenhove et al., 1999). Based on their own economic success, these nations believe that other, less successful, developing nations should also facilitate the diffusion of information infrastructure throughout their societies so as to establish their own NISs if they want to be as economically successful (Van Audenhove et al., 1999). Convergence, consisting of the two processes of digitisation and deregulation, is a scenario deemed by developed nations as most appropriate for the economic development of developing countries – the dominant scenario (Van Audenhove et al., 1999). To establish this scenario, developing countries are urged by developed countries and their allied multinational corporations/agencies to purchase information infrastructure from them at exorbitant prices and, based on the modernisation paradigm, to use the infrastructure as the developed countries have used it (Nulens, 1997).

Since developing countries often cannot afford to buy/pay the required costs, they are often forced to take out loans from developed countries and their allied multinational corporations for which they usually repay through favours e.g. liberalisation of local markets and allowing foreign corporations to come in and exploit local resources for their own benefit (Nulens, 1997). Nulens writes:

However, transposing the western model to a third-world setting hasn't been very successful. The modernisation paradigm seems to be too simplistic to solve world problems. Adherents do not have sound judgement on the complexity of the development process and the difficult of controlling all mediating factors. (1997: 16)

What is meant by the quote above is that some supporters of the modernisation paradigm, governments of both developed and developing countries seem to misunderstand the relationship between technology and society. That instead of being all-powerful over society and enabling society, technology is a part of society. It does not only enable society, it is also enabled by it (Nulens, 1997). Therefore in transferring information infrastructure from developed to developing countries, they need to consider the unique socio-economic and cultural contexts of those developing countries (Nulens, 1997). As a result of their introduction of information infrastructure into third-world settings without making the necessary considerations, for example first minimising crucial problems such as high poverty rates, education-related problems etc., the infrastructure ends up serving only the affluent in the societies (Balliah, 2001). According to Baran, telecommunications' policies in South Africa are not free of the dominant scenario's supposed ambition to help underdeveloped countries attain economic freedom and the debt other underdeveloped countries have incurred as a result of that ambition (Balliah, 2001). Therefore, "Telecommunications in this country is caught up in the antagonism between the economic outlook towards privatization and the State's policies of community upliftment using the Internet" (Baran in Balliah, 2001).

Below, the participants state how, due to a difference in internet access between South Africa and western countries, certain policy changes in the digital games' industry, which is mainly based in first-world settings, are slowly pushing them to the 'have-not' side of the digital divide:

> **Scion**: Game developers are removing LAN functionality from PC gaming. For them, it's fine because they're in America and England where they essentially have free broadband internet. So they don't care if there are no more LANs. In South Africa, access to broadband internet is an issue, I mean; we wouldn't be

able to play online even if we had access to it on campus because there would be proxy issues.

**Roman Prince**: From which games have they removed it?

**Viper**: *Diablo 3, StarCraft 2, Modern Warfare 2...*

**Roman Prince**: (Interrupting Viper) They're really, really screwing us over with the...

**Scion**: (Interrupting Roman Prince) No LAN.

Roman Prince: Ja.

To these participants, LAN functionality[33] in computer games is important because it is central to their gaming sessions together since playing online, although available in South Africa, requires certain expensive internet services which can only be accessed by the affluent in the country. By removing LAN functionality from the latest games, digital game producers are effectively excluding these players from the practice of computer gameplay. Although game producers are removing LAN functionality to combat piracy, forcing people to have access to the internet in order to play their games is counter-productive, especially in countries where there are interest groups who need piracy just to have access to new media in the first place. I argue that the removal of LAN functionality from computer games is another example of the first-world's governments/corporations, in conjunction with local government/corporations, exhibiting a complete disregard of the socio-historical factors in third-world settings when it comes to implementing ICT policy.

In the same way, the increasing divide between the haves and have-nots in this information age explains some of the differences amongst types of gamers, and those between gamers and non-gamers. Most of these participants have grown up in families where computers were present from an early age:

> **Viper**: Actually most of my family except my mother have been gamers. My father used to play a lot when we were young so he got my brother and I into gaming. He used to LAN with us and so forth. And then me and my brother just

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[33] The ability to enable users to connect with each other via a LAN.

continued gaming and so forth. We've always loved it so we've always being doing it.

**Scion**: My dad has always loved computers, since even before I was born. I remember when I was four we had Windows 3 and I was playing an ancient game on that. And basically I've been gaming my entire life.

**Shinni**: My mom ran an I.T. training course and then it shut down. I think she got tired of doing it. And she brought all the computers home. So I was like "OK, I like computers, I could use one, let me take these three, put them together..." So I put them together and she sold the rest and then that's how I got my first computer. And I was like "OK, I have a PC now, what do I do?" I found a few small games and I started playing them because my friends were playing them and then it just started getting bigger and bigger as I went through high school.

Based on their computer-related backgrounds and the amount of time they have been playing computer games, one could argue that these players have mastered some of the rules of computer gameplay as a semiotic domain. In other words, they seem to have learned how to follow the domain's preferred way of 'reading and writing' (Gee, 2003). Their middle-class social backgrounds granted them access to computers and their games thus providing them the opportunity to learn how they function, and how to perform with and around them. Although non-gamers were not interviewed in this study, and being a non-gamer does not necessarily mean one did not have access to computers, I argue that in South Africa, a third-world information and communications technology (ICT) setting shrouded by issues of inequality, lack of access to these technologies and hence any information about them is one of the reasons non-gamers cannot identify with gamers on the Rhodes University campus:

**Viper**: People that aren't gamers won't get what gaming is about. They won't really understand it as well and they'll see it kind of as a waste of time.

**Tidus**: The thing is they can't relate to us, like when we're a mixed group and two of us are gamers and the rest of the friends who aren't gamers... the two of us will speak and maybe we'll start talking about a game – or just talk about something else but use gaming jargon. The other people will say "Well, what does that mean?" And we'll have to explain whatever it is we're talking about because they don't really understand and then they can't really fit in because the gaming scene is not really easy for an outside person to get into. It takes a while to get into the whole thing and learn all the jargon.

It is also one of the main reasons the majority of gamers in GameSoc, as mentioned in chapter 1, are white. Looking at South Africa's social history of segregation between blacks and whites (Sparks, 1991), the above-mentioned issues of inequality cannot be completely divorced from matters of race. This segregation meant that black and white people had access to different services in the country, as shown by one of Barry Hertzog's policies: the *civilized labour* policy which "gave job preference to 'civilized' whites instead of 'uncivilized' blacks" (Sparks, 1991: 152). Formed under the governance of the newly united Afrikaner and British groups, this policy uplifted mainly, if not only, poorer white people to more favourable economic standards while blacks and other coloured races had opportunities only to menial jobs with very little pay (Sparks, 1991). Although these participants as well as their GameSoc-member counterparts are not racist in choosing who they play games with, as shown by my being able to join the society, my being excluded from the computer gaming session at the society's event mentioned in chapter 1 had a connection to my race by virtue of South Africa's political history as the society's socio-economic context.

As exemplified by Strelitz (2002) in his paper *Media Consumption and Identity Formation: The Case of the Homeland Viewers*, there are black students on the Rhodes University campus who are from working class to rural backgrounds. This fact, he linked to the apartheid regime's education policies which privileged white people's education over all other races e.g. by way of funding their needs for buildings, teachers etc. more generously in comparison so as to reinforce the apartheid way of thinking (Strelitz, 2002). The Department of Education and Training administered these policies in order to ensure that coloured people, including blacks, were given inferior education hence skills so that they are prevented from improving their economic situations and forced to stay as the working class of the South African economy: their position as the labour of the country (Sparks, 1991: 139). This also means that many of these black students first come into contact with computer technology when they arrive at Rhodes University. So they often have difficulties using this technology for academic purposes let alone learning to play computer games on it.

Coming from a middle-class family, I had access to computer technology at school and at home. At school, however, my exposure to this technology was restricted to academic-related purposes

only at specific times within school hours. At home, we had only one computer which my belonged to my father, this he would often use for work-related purposes hence despite the fact that I could play computer games on it – sharing it with him and my younger brother also limited the amount of time in which I could do so. Considering the purpose my father got that computer, I could often not convince him to upgrade the computer regularly so that I could keep up with the gaming industry by playing more complex games that required more expensive computer parts. This is in addition to the perception that playing digital games competes directly with doing school work and developing oneself – a waste of time, this is a view my parents agree with. As a result, I and my circle of influence[34] became people who had had experience playing computer games, but not enough exposure to become passionate about it. In this sense, my social background played an important part in my not being part of the computer gaming technic local, national or global community.

Whether other middle-class non-white students have similar social backgrounds can be further explored but I believe the fact that the majority of GameSoc's computer-gaming technic sub-community consists of white people despite middle-class children and students having access to computer technology says something about their perceptions towards such a practice and the manner in which those perceptions have been influenced by their social contexts.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this study, I was fascinated by the manner in which computer-game players managed their practice in a way that communicated a certain message to those outside their community. Driven by my feeling of being excluded during The GameSoc's event mentioned in chapter 1, I wanted to understand the relationship shared amongst those gamers, how they understand their own practice and whether, at the time, my exclusion from their computer gaming culture had any racial.

Based on the findings presented in this chapter, it is safe to argue that those computer-game players are a community with their own values that are reinforced and maintained mainly through their practice of LAN-gameplay. Since their values are based on a technology-centred

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[34] Friends with whom I went to school.

practice, their community's identity is cybernetic – a technic transformation that has made them part-human-part-machine. This is shown by the fact that their practices often transcend worlds, that is, the material and cybernetic worlds. For example, their usage of pseudonyms for identification not only by their fellow gamers in the digital gameworld but also by non-gamers in the material world by keeping in touch with them through e-mail and social-networking websites.

Even so, their technicity is only but a type of cybernetic identity. There are some technic identities whose practices are focussed on a different usage of the same computer technology, and others that use different technology altogether both by choice and the social circumstances in which they find themselves. This was illustrated by the apparent distinction between computer gamers, console-video gamers and non-gamers on the Rhodes University campus. Socio-economic relations between these technicities as exhibited by various observations that have been quoted in this chapter e.g. the stigmatising of the practice of computer gameplay as childish and anti-social and that of console-video gamers as consoletards, show that technic identities are deeply rooted in power relations.

These power relations also explain why the computer gaming culture on the Rhodes University campus is highly patriarchal. Female students have been socialised in such a way that they are pressured to lose interest in playing digital games as they grow up. They are expected to use computers for either academic or 'more social' reasons. This explains why they would regard computer gaming as childish and anti-social which in-turn would explain GameSoc having very few female members.

Taking into consideration, South Africa's ICT development history and its connection to Rhodes University's gaming culture, I was able to understand the reason I could not be included into that gaming session at the GameSoc's event I mentioned above. Due to the fact that I could not afford my own computer as I grew up – and the only one in my middle-class home was shared by the entire family so it was meant for only 'important' uses, my gaming experiences primarily took place on the console. Although I also had access to computer at primary and high school, gaming was not allowed on them due to its stigma as a waste of time, therefore I used computers mainly only for work-related purposes. As a result, I became accustomed to the console for gaming as the years went on and thus began identifying myself as a console-video gamer i.e. a consoletard.

As a member of technic community which, based on the perceptions of these participants: all of whom are members of the GameSoc, is somewhat oppositional to the values of their technicity, and with the computer and gaming background I had which was greatly influenced by my socio-economic and cultural background, I was unable to identify with the computer gamers, to understand their gameplay culture and values and hence, apart from the fact that they were playing a game together, I could comprehend what else was going on in that gaming situation.

I argue that my own experience is illustrative of one of the possible reasons the majority of other black students from middle-class backgrounds do not get involved in computer gaming. On the other hand, black students from disadvantaged schools often start using computers when they get to university due to their inability to afford the technology. So their minimal knowledge in the usage of computer technology already estranges from the gaming practice let alone knowing to play any particular game. This could also apply to other coloured races on the Rhodes University campus due to their similar socio-cultural and economic South African background as shown by the fact that GameSoc has a predominantly white computer gaming – there are fewer numbers of computer gaming members belonging to all other coloured races, not just blacks.

This thesis has pointed out to me that social relations amongst a society's interest groups are central to the manner in which sub-cultures emerge. These participants' computer-gameplay community has been established on values greatly influenced, in a similar way to my technicity, by the economic and cultural factors of their social environments. LAN-gameplay is one of the central practices on which these values are based and I argue that one of the main reasons for this is because of issues pertaining to unequal access to ICTs and related services amongst South Africa's interest groups. Based on their propensity towards playing with other people, I believe that these participants would make online gameplay their primary practice – if they could.

# Chapter 7: Conclusion

What I found through conducting this study is that like any other community in society, these computer gamers' technicity is socio-economically situated in society so as to include and exclude people according to certain formerly established as well as emergent criteria. The possession of some of the characteristics by the participants themselves was not entirely up to them, but mainly a result of them exercising their agency in specific but emergent social conditions. These characteristics included their interest in digital games, their learnedness in the practice's semiotic domain and their social background with respect to computers and their games.

In distinguishing between themselves as gamers from non-gamers on campus, and mentioning how the digital gaming practice often competes with that of 'going out', mainly practiced by non-gamers, participants revealed a felt tension between the two communities. This is despite the fact that some of them had non-gaming friends. In this way, considering the fact that going out is a more socially prominent practice on the Rhodes University campus, it seemed obvious to me that founding the Gaming Society (GameSoc) was a way to provide a 'home' for gamers, somewhere they can enjoy their practice and maintain their identity while escaping the unfavourable attention that comes with the stigma attached to it. This is similar to O'Shea's (2004) findings of how Generations (italics) served to reaffirm black students' identities on a campus dominated by white students.

GameSoc's computer gaming sub-community consists mainly of white students because they possessed the above-mentioned characteristics. Black students[35] have largely been excluded from this community not by its members not being accepting of their racial identity, but by their lack of the required skills to join in its performances, learn its practices and become a part of it – a 'deficiency' which they have because of their unique socio-cultural history related to their race. In this way, their race is not central to their ability to join the community, it is these characteristics. This is shown by the fact that there are a minority of black students who have been able to join the society's computer gaming culture. However, race is a secondary issue by virtue of South Africa socio-political, economic and cultural history and how it relates to each race-group.

The socio-historical context is also central to explaining the fact that there are very few women who play computer games on the Rhodes University campus as expressed by the participants interviewed. As noted in the previous chapter, Cassell and Jenkins (1998) explain how gender relations around the usage of computers have privileged men as more suitable to use them. Therefore, women have been socialised to stay away from using computers unless absolutely necessary e.g. for academic or work-related purposes. Having been pressured to stop playing computer games at young age, many female students grow up looking at digital gaming as, according to Fromme (2003), a 'less serious' type of computer usage. This can be applied to the Rhodes University context as, according to the participants interviewed, many female students find the playing of computer games as childish and anti-social.

What was interesting to see was the variation in which each of these participants' personalised values that were common to them all – values that represented their identity. As displayed by Tidus in the previous chapter, not all of them exhibited the same degree of opposition towards the practice of console-video gaming. In fact, while comparing their preferred platform with the console, these participants often agreed to the value of the console in various areas such as monetary cost. They sided strongly with the PC despite acknowledging the fact that whatever advantage it provided of which they could use as a justification for their preference, one could counter it with another given by the console.

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[35] The term 'black' here refers to African, coloured and Indian students.

This is why both Scion and Tidus both 'confessed' to owning consoles. Using a comparison between PC and console input hardware to explain their somewhat ambiguous position, here is what they had to say:

> **Tidus**: OK well coming from a PC background where you're able to move your mouse and get precise aiming, and then trying to play Gears of War on the console with like a stick that is like...[showing a facial expression which I interpreted as disapproval] but to a new person who hasn't played on PC, for them to get into a game like HALO [a console game]... it's like a whole new way of playing FPSs on a console and they [new people who have never played on the PC] got into that. If you try to make them play HALO on the PC, it will be difficult for them.

So according to Tidus, these participants' preference for the PC over the console has a lot to do with their gaming backgrounds. They got exposed to PC gaming before console-video gaming and thus have been playing it for a longer period of time. As a result, they have become so comfortable with the way it works that any alternative way of playing games such as that which is suggested by the console takes them out of that comfort zone and back to square one with reference to learning how the console works.

Based on the responses obtained, I argue that their community and hence its identity is about to undergo a significant change as the gaming industry quickly centers its focus on the internet. I think that piracy will prove to be useful for them again if, through their agency, they decide to use it appropriately so as to ensure that their technicity endures and adapts to the technological developments to come. Based on my own experience, piracy has saved many gaming practices, including those of consoles in much the same way: by providing players with a way across the digital divide. Recently, the PlayStation 3 was hacked, enabling its owners to use it for more uses and granting them greater access to its games.

# Appendix 1

## Interview guide

*Technicity*

- How they know one another
    - How they define the relationships they share amongst each other
        - ❖ Explore conversations outside the gaming situation
    - Pseudonyms and what they mean to each player
    - How they relate with friends who do not play computer games
- About the Gaming Society
- How they got exposed to computers
    - When they started playing computer games
    - Do they always buy games or is piracy sometimes involved
    - Viper's computer used for LAN gameplay, how?
- Technicalities involved in the playing of computer games
    - Can any computer play any game?
    - Access to the necessary technology (the right computer).
    - Online gaming vs. LAN gaming
- Attitudes
    - towards the playing of console & handheld games
    - towards the playing of computer games

- their main focus
o Attitudes towards the playing of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2
  - Perceptions about their own skills
    - ❖ Playing with a beginner
    - ❖ How they obtained their current skill-level
  - Attitudes towards the playing of Counter Strike
  - How often you get together to play
  - Team death-match mode of gameplay
    - ❖ What it entails
    - ❖ Code of conduct
      - o Once having cheated, can one still hang with you?
      - o Are there any other disciplinary measures? Who do you report to?
    - ❖ Communication
    - ❖ Spice up gameplay (modifications)
      - o What are some of these hacks? What do they allow one to do?
  - Special OPS mode of gameplay
    - ❖ What it entails
    - ❖ Code of conduct
      - o Once having cheated, can one still hang with you?
    - ❖ Communication
    - ❖ Spice up gameplay (modifications)
  - Attitudes about story mode
    - ❖ America/Russia antagonism
    - ❖ Women soldiers

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