School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds

Motivation, Play, and Skill

Towards a Player-centric Perspective on the Videogame Medium

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own, except where work which has formed part of jointly authored publications has been included. The contribution of the candidate and the other authors to this work has been explicitly indicated below. The candidate confirms that appropriate credit has been given within the thesis where reference has been made to the work of others.

Part of Chapter 3 (pp. 44-59) of the thesis is published on **CONVERGENCE: THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH INTO NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES**, under the title of 'Gaming-value and culture-value: Understanding how players account for video game purchases' on 28.11.2017. It is co-authored with Dr Mark R. Johnson.

Based on data I collected during my PhD, in 2015 I developed the outline for the paper, which is understanding videogame purchases and acquisitions through Marxist value theory with the two new value concepts of "gaming-value" and "culture-value". I developed this outline when drafting a chapter for the thesis. Starting in early-mid 2016 I worked with Dr Mark R Johnson to develop a section of the chapter draft - which focused on the videogame purchases in the West - into a journal article. Whilst the core of the paper's argument remains as I proposed, Dr Johnson and I contributed equally to the iterative process that resulted in the final publication.

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Abstract

This study investigates player-videogame relationships, with a greater ambition of developing a player-centric perspective for the studies of the videogame medium, players, and gaming culture. Taking inspiration from Audience Studies and the grounded theory approach, the project employs gaming-interviews (playing games followed by a semi-structured interview) with 30 Western (20 male and 10 female) and 20 Chinese (10 male and 10 female) participants. To facilitate the analysis, I introduced three concepts: motivation, play and skills. Each of the three notions addresses a key element of the player-videogame relationship: motivation refers to *why* players engage with the medium; play refers to *how* players engage with the medium; and skills refers to the challenges posed *by* and experienced *through* the medium.

Drawing on these concepts, I examine participants' remarks on their engagement with the videogame medium. Analyses of participants' remarks on motivation, play, and skills indicate that they understand their relationship with the videogame medium through their everyday gaming experiences, and they understand it to be highly personal and individualised.

I argue that to develop a player-centric perspective on videogames is to centre players' accounts about their experiences with the videogames, but not to draw conclusions that are only based on these experiences. Players' accounts about their experiences do not just reveal what they notice about media content or what they do with the videogame medium. Rather, a player-centric perspective investigates the sophisticated and multi-layered meaning-making process, where a range of different socio-cultural and economic factors play important roles. A player-centric perspective is not only about recording these accounts, but also untangles and reveals the struggle and harmony behind these meaning-making processes. Borrowing from Roy Bhaskar, players' accounts are 'statements of being' and should not be reduced to 'statements of knowledge'.

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Why Videogames?

Over the last two decades, the popularity of videogames has exploded (Donovan, 2010). Judging by the sheer size of the industry [total revenue of $108.9 billion for 2012 and estimated to reach $128.5 billion by 2020[1]] and the sheer number of people in possession of gaming consoles [for example 80% of UK households own at least one last-gen gaming console (Wallop, 2009)], to say videogames are popular is an understatement (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al, 2013, pp. 15-27). Videogames are a perfect storm in the digital era (Ruggill & McAllister, 2011, pp. 4-6), or in Ruggill and McAllister's word, metaphorically, videogames are 'magic' (2011, p. 5).

However with popularity also comes censure. From the early 1990s until the time writing, videogames have been aligned to – and are still involved in – many controversies: violence, socially deviant behaviour, addiction (for example: Bryce & Rutter, 2006; Ferguson, 2007; Calleja, 2010) to name a few. While such controversies are hardly exclusive to this particular medium, they are nevertheless reflected in how people approach videogames. Previous research into gaming suggests these controversies have also impacted on players themselves who negotiate their identity as 'gamers' with caution (Thornham, 2009; Shaw, 2011). It is also notable that the words 'game' or 'videogame' are rarely found in the long list of videogame studios, distributors and associations (Newman, 2013, p. 7). In the words of Newman, rhetorically, 'everybody hates videogames.' (2008, p. 19)

For these reasons, videogames are receiving increasing academic attention (Mäyrä, 2009, pp. 314-319). Yet much of this attention focuses on either the media content or the potential effects (both positive and negative). We still know very little about the role videogames play in our society and culture, despite all the assumptions about them. Even less is known about the players or about the socio-political position of videogames in their lives (Newman, 2013, pp. 49-54). Many questions that are instrumental to a comprehensive understanding of the player-videogame relationship, such as why players play videogames in the first place, remain unanswered. On that note, we can see resonances between the contemporary experience of the Game Studies discipline and early Media Studies in terms of the criticisms that both focus

[1] https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/the-global-games-market-will-reach-108-9-billion-in-2017-with-mobile-taking-42/, last accessed 15/03/18.

the majority of attention on media content to the detriment of other elements (Behrenshausen, 2012). We can note that contemporary Game Studies is concerned with media effects, for example, and that the 'audience' – the players – are often assumed, while the actual media use is imagined (Williams, 1974; McQuail, 1997, pp. 1-11; Silverstone, 1999). Simply put, there is a familiar – and problematic – disconnect between the academic focus and players' everyday media practices and experiences (Couldry, 2014, pp. 214-216; Ruddock, 2007, pp. 10-12).

In this introductory chapter, I begin by elaborating on the key idea of a 'player-centric approach'. In order to address the issues described above, this study aims to place players at the centre of its scope. However unlike 'videogame player studies' that often seek to examine players, inspired by Audience Studies, this study takes the player's perspective: asking the players to talk about what they do with videogames, what they think about the videogame medium, and how they make sense of it. In order to achieve this goal, the study introduces three concepts: play, skill(s), and motivation; each concept will be discussed in detail in its respective section.

In the section **PLAY**, I further unpack the notion of play in this study. Drawing on Raessens' (2005) model of audience participation and the concept of space of possibilities, players' engagement with videogames is discussed under two categories: gaming; and playing with videogames[2]. The aim of this section is to demonstrate the complex and subjective nature of play by highlighting its many possibilities and nuances.

In **GAMING SKILLS**, I argue that the concept could be better understood through the scope of self-perception. By interrogating the industry's and academia's conceptualisation of skills (a quantifiable matter and strong predictor of motivation for play by the industry, or a measurable, consistent set of abilities that shapes play and a player's perception of play), the discussion illustrates that the concept of skills is contingent on a range of different contextual factors and built on segmented, scattered gaming experiences.

I argue that motivations for play, like motivations for uses of other media, are: 1) socially constructed, framed by factors such as cultural background or economy; 2) fragmented, contingent on time and space, as well as the media content, and further complicated by some unique features of play and the involvement of skill. The literature review concludes with a

[2] The latter term is taken from Newman's work on players' engagement with videogames besides gaming (2009).

discussion on the importance of understanding the players' perspective in tackling why players play videogames.

Overall, the lens of gaming skills (as self-perception) allows me to address the uniqueness of play (reconfiguration) and videogames (challenges) from players' perspectives. Thus the nuances and complexity in players' (accounts of) motivation for play can be properly approached and understood. Taken together, these three concepts allow me to investigate the player-videogame relationship with players in the centre of the study's scope.

Why the Player-centric Approach?

I first want to discuss why I take this player-centric approach. Simply put, players are crucial. For the industry, they are the buyers and end users of the products, the source of current and future revenue (Nichols, 2013). For academia, players are the subject of play, the primary contributors and foundation of the videogame culture (Gee & Hayes, 2010), which is now a prominent component of contemporary popular culture (Ruggill & McAllister, 2011). Knowing precisely who plays and how they play is pivotal for gaining deeper insights into social phenomena such as play, videogame/gaming culture, or occurrences that centre on particular videogames (Lucás, et al, 2010; Newman, 2013):

> As players, we have an important role to play in bringing videogames to life. Without a player to direct or enable the action, most videogames either cease to be… or… waiting for the player to *do* something to progress from the stasis. It is not merely that players expect to do rather than watch as (Rouse & Ogden, 2001) suggest, but that they are *required* to do. In short, videogames need players (Newman, 2009, pp. 510-511; emphasis and reference in original).

Yet and despite all this, we still know very little about the players. The demographic of players are usually inferred based on the content of videogames and general consumer statistics – with the exception of a few 'odd' popular cases [games such as **SECOND LIFE** (Linden Research, Inc, 2003-), **THE SIMS** franchise (Maxis, 2000-) or **WORLD OF WARCRAFT** (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004-)]. Typically we do not know who plays what games, let alone *how* they play. The situation calls for more player-centric research – not in the sense of looking at players simplistically as a faceless crowd, as in most psychological studies (Ferguson, 2007), but as living, breathing, colourful individuals, as in contemporary Audience Studies (Madianoun, 2011; Ruddock, 2007). Game Studies needs a player-centric perspective to fully account for the fact that it is the players' own interactions with videogames that render videogames meaningful

for them. In particular, Game Studies needs a player-centric approach that is not pre-determined by the media content (by investigating players of specific games or genres) or particular type of engagement [by investigating players who participate in certain types of activities, such as raiding (Williams, et al, 2006), gold-farming (Nakamura, 2009) or other fandom activities (Newman, 2008)].

When searching for such a player-centric perspective, I argue Audience Studies is where Game Studies can draw the most *direct* inspiration from. Indeed, the challenges faced by current Game Studies in the study of players resembles those that early Audience Studies have encountered – particularly in the study of popular media audiences (see Hills, 2002; Ruddock, 2007). For example, as early as 1974, Williams had already warned us against the danger of an over-reliance on textual analyses and obsession with media effects (1974). Ruddock also points out that investigation into audiences' motivations for media use is typically based on the assumption that media uses are always motivated by the content, yet ignore the motivation related to the socio-cultural meanings of the activities of media uses in and on themselves (2007, pp. 65-69).

Audience Studies also offers a rich body of literature for this study to draw on in order to overcome such challenges, especially in terms of methodology. For example, Williams suggests more attention needs to be paid to the actual media practices and the relationships between such practices (1974, p. 20); Ruddock argues the discussion of reasons behind media uses can and should acknowledge the media content, but not be confined by it (Ruddock, 2007, pp. 65-69). Silverstone argues that media practices/experiences should not just be approached purely as activities of the mind, but also as interactions with the physical world (1999, p. 10). Couldry argues that we need to focus on 'the texture of people's audience practices'; *alongside* 'the media contents accessed through those practices' *and*; 'the wider uses and practice contexts served by, or associated with those practices' (2014, p. 223). Such literature informs this study, which starts with the investigation of play by looking into: 1) the patterns of players' engagement with videogames; 2) the trajectories players take through the videogames they play and play with; and 3) the socio-cultural and political contexts of play. To further enhance the emphasis on the socio-cultural context and take advantage of my personal socio-cultural background, participants of two very different cultural backgrounds were engaged: the West (primarily British) and Chinese. However, in line with the underpinning grounded approach, this study does not seek to approach the socio-cultural contexts with pre-determined assumptions; instead, this study allows the relationships between the players'/participants' accounts and their respective socio-cultural backgrounds to

merge through the process of analysis. I will discuss the methodology and methods of this study in greater details in the next chapter.

My approach has roots in Audience Studies and partly psychology. It borrows from these disciplines a political and critical orientation towards the subject matter, but it re-forms them in the context of a new(er) digital form. Alongside these traditional disciplines, I also utilise Game Studies. This study is politically and critically aligned to the particular approaches espoused by Thornham (2008; 2009; 2011), Calleja (2010; 2011) and Shaw (2010; 2013). The goal of this study is to investigate the player-videogame relationship through the lenses of motivation, play, and skill. However, my aim is not to use these as overt framing tools. Instead I seek to understand how these concepts emerge through my research: the goal is to explore how players perceive and articulate videogames and how their understandings and reflections are framed culturally and economically[3]. My hope is that this will not just lead to deeper insights into the questions I want to ask, but through this understand the socio-political position of videogames in players' lives, and ultimately the role of videogames in our society – as both new digital forms and traditional cultural practices.

Borrowing from the tradition of Audience Studies, and inspired by contemporary videogame ethnography, this study aims to present the videogame-player relationship. Unlike many existing studies, this study approaches players as well as their interactions with the videogame medium with as little pre-determined selection criteria as possible: this study does not fixate on the 'pro-active' fandom, which is signified by constant involvement in creating additional media content, both videogame content and that of other media forms, such as fan-art or guides. Instead, this study identifies a player with one single condition: as long as one plays videogames – videogame of any sorts – then they are considered to be a player. Similarly, in terms of player-videogame interactions, this study does not limit the scope to those that happen within the digital worlds of videogames (gaming); rather, this study investigates other non-direct engagements with the videogame medium, such as purchases/acquisition of videogames and related equipment, or using other media content about videogames. This study seeks to paint a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of the player-videogame relationship by investigating the many varieties of engagement with the videogame medium

[3] I use the term *culture/cultural* not just to refer to the national and/or ethnic culture. Rather, I use the term inclusively as an assembly of an individual's social/cultural background, including national/ethnic culture, gender, age, social class, family, and experiences with videogames, as well as the individual's perceived position in the overall videogame culture.

through which such relationships are maintained, and also by acknowledging the socio-cultural contexts upon which such relationships are constructed.

Motivation

Meaning-making of the videogame medium is complex and subjective. This is because videogames are media artefacts that provide spaces for complexity and subjectivity to emerge, partly because of their great versatility (Gee, 2006). Alongside skill-based challenges, videogames are capable of delivering complex rules and/or narratives that speak to different demands and can convey serious, deep meanings, if necessary. In fact, games are not just expertly designed to fulfil various serious purposes, such as military training, education and research (Robinson, 2012; Lieberman, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2006), but commercial games are purposely made to be provocative, or directly engage with political and philosophical topics to some degree (Atkins, 2003; Klimmt, et al, 2009; Tocci, 2008).

Secondly, players engage with videogames for various reasons (see: Yee, n.d.; Yoon & Cheon, 2013): enjoying narratives (Neitzel, 2006; Wendler, 2014; Zakowski, 2014); experiencing the aesthetics of representations and rules (Gee, 2006; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al, 2013, pp. 117-155); and pursuing the psychological thrills of challenges, failure, improvement of skills and success (Genvo, 2009; Juul, 2013). Ethnographic studies of videogames further clarify that players' meaning-making for play is highly versatile and subjective (see: Sherry et al, 2006; Calleja, 2011; Thornham, 2011; Shaw, 2011); and such versatility and personalisation are actually reflected in their play activities as documented in these studies.

Lastly, play, as a cultural activity, can be purposeful on its own. Studies demonstrate compelling evidence for the argument that players play videogames for reasons beyond the boundaries of media content. For example, Hjorth et al (2013) and Thornham's (2011) studies reveal that players avail themselves of play (with other players) to maintain social bonds; Shaw (2011) indicates that players consider play (by themselves) as a means of maintaining their cultural identities[4]. In both cases, the motivation for play is anchored not only in the media content, but more importantly by how players situate play in their socio-cultural and political lives. This idea resonates greatly with the concept 'the meaning of meaningless' proposed by Ruddock (2007, pp. 65-69) for approaching media use in general.

[4] This aspect resonates greatly with both my own experiences and those I have been told about by other players.

Despite this, videogames continue to be understood as media content created for entertainment purposes – as much as it reflects the nature of the majority of commercially released games, such an understanding greatly undermines the complexity of the medium. For instance, by being considered 'mere entertainment', videogames are thought of as juvenile and low-art in academia. Newman argues that videogames have been historically denied their due cultural and economic significance, as well as subsequent academic scrutiny (2013, p. 6). Players will sometimes find themselves legitimising their interests in videogames and play – typically by either arguing videogames have understated potential beyond the 'mere entertainment appearance', or simply distancing themselves from videogames and play (Thornham, 2009; Shaw, 2011).

However I argue that simply interpreting the discrepancy between the general understanding of 'for entertainment' and players' statements as attempts at rationalising perceived 'unworthy leisure activity' risks losing sight of the complex, even contradictory, nature of players' meaning-making of play. Such thinking would continue to frame Game Studies through textual analyses and speculations about media effects. In turn we would also be in danger of ignoring the importance of videogames and play beyond the mere premises of media content. The solution to this, I argue, lies in player-centric qualitative approaches: we need to bring players to the centre of our focus in order to understand why they play videogames.

I am seeking to elucidate the complexities bound up in videogames through a particular consideration of the rationales, reflections and considerations expressed by players around play. In so doing, I also aim to understand play and skill as integral to the meaning-making of the videogame medium, and consequently work towards a better definition of these concepts, which takes players' own subjective positioning into account. My questions are as follows:

1. What is players' motivation for play? What does this reveal for play, for skill and for their identity as players? How do these issues interrelate? How do they understand and articulate their motivation and what does this reveal about the wider popular and cultural, industry and academic constructions of videogames? In other words, to what extent do their motivations support or undermine the metanarratives of videogames?
2. What does the participants' conceptualisation of motivation reveal for videogames themselves: how does motivation construct them and what does motivation indicate as meaningful or valuable about them?

Play

In this study, I use *play* to refer to players' engagement with videogames. In other words, I understand play as more than the act of 'picking up a controller and interacting with a videogame'. Play also pertains to reading and talking about videogames, buying videogames and related devices, hacking and 'modding' videogames, and much more. The range of activities this term covers is considerably wider than immediate interaction with an interface, and in order to approach the issue of play, I further divide it into two categories: what I refer to as 'gaming' (reconfiguration) and 'play with videogames'. The latter concept relates to whether engagement with videogames takes place in the space of possibilities (this concept will be elaborated on in the section below). While the former attracts most attention from academia as it is central to player-videogame relationships, I argue that the latter deserves more academic scrutiny. This is because, as I demonstrate below, not only is gaming framed by play with videogames, but such activities are also as meaningful and purposeful *as* gaming.

Play as Gaming

The term 'gaming' refers to the players' direct interactions with videogames – or as we often see in both academic and public discourses: playing a game. This term, while still being simple and indicative of the nature of such activities, distinguishes gaming from play and play with videogames. Doing this facilitates the discussions in the following section and chapter, which elaborate on the argument that direct engagement is not the only meaningful interaction a player can have with the videogame medium. In distinguishing gaming from play and play with videogames, I am drawing on Raessens' model of participatory media (2005, pp. 378-381), which unpacks the notion of participation/ interactivity, but also offers horizontal comparisons with other media forms (in terms of possibilities of audience participation).

According to Raessens (2005), users' participation with a media product could be roughly divided into three domains: interpretation, reconfiguration, and construction – or interpreting existing texts, rearranging existing contents, and constructing new content. Whereas interpretation is mandatory for using any media, and construction can be performed within the context of most media, it is reconfiguration that makes videogames unique. In this sense, gaming reconfigures its content within the pre-structured rule system: a player gives commands through physical interfaces, mobilising pre-existing materials in the game's database to form tangible, visual-audio responses for further interpretations. And such interpretations are references for their further reconfiguration (or re-construction), whereupon a new cycle begins. Gaming consists of many such cycles. Players need to constantly input commands to

keep the flow of reconfiguration: active gaming is a necessity for videogames to fulfil their purposes (Sherry, et al, 2006; Newman, 2009), whatever these might be.

A videogame will react to the player's inputs by giving visual/audio feedback, which is typically unknown to players until it is given. This is because rules are sophisticated and hidden from players (Genvo, 2009; Juul, 2005, pp. 55-57) – a player can *predict* the rules by drawing on previous gaming experiences, but although they could *infer* the rules based on representation, they cannot actually *see* the rules. Secondly, it is very unlikely for a player to have two identical encounters in one videogame (Gee, 2006). The same set of rules could be applied to many different scenes, and even for an identical scene, a player could choose to navigate through it differently[5]. Hence gaming is a process of exploration (Raessens, 2005): an expedition into the game as an entirety. The player ventures into the unknown of the representation system, and the unknown of the rule system.

This not only means that gaming is subjective and personal (Gee, 2006), but that, conceptually, this subjective and personal approach needs to be recognised, and my concept of play as gaming (reconfiguration) is an attempt to do just that. Playing through a videogame is a player's own unique and, more importantly, hard-earned journey through the media content in a literal sense (Gee, 2006). On the one hand, aspects that are parallel to traditional media experiences are tweaked by reconfiguration in a way that welcomes players to infuse their individual understandings and preferences into the content (although this can be limited). This generates a more personal gaming experience [for example: Atkins (2003); Tavinor (2005); Klimmt, et al (2009); Wendler (2014)]. It is indeed debatable whether players should be thought of as more active than 'audiences' or 'consumers' of other media products, not least because they are still dealing with pre-structured content (Behrenshausen, 2012). What *is* different, however, is that gaming not only rearranges content for interpretation, but also has significance of its own. This means that motivations for gaming are not just about the content (rules and representations), but also about the gaming activity in and of itself. This aspect is further discussed in **CHAPTER 4: MOTIVATION**, below – I now turn to the activities of 'playing with videogames' to further elucidate the concept of play.

[5] Even if the player did indeed decide to make exactly the same choices, due to the immensity and invisibility of the rule system, they would not know whether the exact same tactic would lead to the exact same outcome – back to the first reason, one could only predict but not actually foresee the result.

Beyond the Immediate Boundary of Gaming

Gaming is not the only method for engaging with the videogame medium. As Newman points out, players also *play* with videogame (2008, p. 13). By this he means that gamers have a range of other 'playful' interactions with the videogame medium that is not gaming. Following Newman's lead, this study also categorises a player's engagement with videogames as inclusive of activities that take place beyond the immediate reconfiguration that is play as gaming (described above). Some of these activities have been termed 'modding' or hacking in previous studies (Newman, 2008, pp. 160-163) and refer to playing with the signs that present the space and/or playing with the rules that regulate it. With certain tools and knowledge, a player could amend the representation system; they could also modify the rule system to alter the game-world; or do both (Raessens, 2005; Newman, 2008, pp. 151-152).

The term 'playing with videogames' in this thesis thus extends to include types of activities that the majority of players, if not all, engage with. Most significantly for this study, playing with videogames includes the purchasing/acquiring of videogames and relevant equipment, and the reading/watching of other media content that pertains to videogames, such as trailers, news, walkthroughs, or strategy guides. There are also some activities that do not involve any rule systems or representational systems directly, such as: writing and sharing walkthroughs and reviews, or searching and using walkthroughs; writing/talking about videogames; and making fan-art about videogames (see also: Steinkuehler, 2006). Play with videogames could be seen then as a further extended version of Calleja's definition of macro involvement (2011, pp. 38-40) with videogames, which he defines as activities that contextualise and frame the actual moment of gaming (postgame/pregame experiences).

Here I seek to address the performative, mediatory, pleasurable and leisure-orientated elements of videogames in ways that will also redefine the concept of play and (re)introduce issues of spatiality, temporality and diversity. I also try to present the activity of play as a central facet of videogames in order to address these issues and further critique existing literature. Here I ask:

1. What are the activities that contribute to gaming? How do players understand 'playing with videogames' and to what extent do these activities contribute to and frame gaming?
2. How and when does play occur? What considerations accompany play and how are these 'enacted', 'performed', and 'mediated'? What happens during play and what does this reveal about motivation and skill?

3. How do players reflect on play? How do players understand play and to what extent does this relate to actual play? What does such a comparison between players' own understandings and play itself reveal?

Gaming Skills

Gaming skills is one of the 'god terms' among players and even game scholars. By 'god term' I am referring to the work of the rhetorician Burke (1969), who describes it as that in which 'we can posit a world, in the sense that we can treat the world *in terms of it*, seeing all emanations, near or far, of its light' (p. 105). In other words, gaming skills is a term that every player and game scholar *knows* and understands despite its precise definition being elusive or subjective. My participants broadly understood gaming skills as referring to: a player's ability in overcoming challenges in videogames; the weight this carries within the game and socially; and the knowledge and experience that is essential to play and relates to various motivations on a multitude of levels. However, it was very hard to pin down a precise definition. To confront such simplicity and to 'ask ourselves what complexities [are] subsumed beneath it' (Burke, 1969 p. 105) is a challenge and in this section I aim to elaborate how gaming skills constitute play. Ultimately I argue that gaming skills ought to be approached more in keeping with notions of self-perception rather than as an 'objective' attribute. I will start with a discussion about the most obvious way that we can define skills: as abilities for overcoming challenges.

Skills as Overcoming Challenges: Necessity

To start with some of the broader and more established definitions of skills, one way to conceptualise skills is to regard it as a player's ability in overcoming challenges, which are one key feature of videogames (Juul, 2009; Juul, 2005). A videogame usually offers challenges of various difficulties – gradually becoming harder as the game progresses, with several different difficulty settings for the entire game (Juul, 2009; Juul, 2005). In other words, the existence of challenges is consistent throughout most, if not all, videogames (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003). Therefore we could say as a broad and basic definition that the ability to overcome challenges is indeed a gaming skill.

Moreover, the joy of triumphing over challenges is argued to be one of the more important reasons why gaming is considered to be fun and hence enjoyed by so many players (Juul, 2009; Juul, 2013; Lankoski, 2011; McAllister & Ruggill, 2010). Indeed, much play with videogames activities also revolves around challenges. A large portion of a walkthrough or FAQ is dedicated to strategy guides or tips for play, which essentially help other players overcome

challenges. Also, a considerable amount of hacking and modding activities are about altering the challenges by amending the rules (Newman, 2009), which would eventually either heighten or lower the requirement for abilities in overcoming them (Consalvo, 2007). Here then, the notion of skill becomes more complex, not least because the idea of enjoyment and challenge relates to a number of other psychological and sociological theories of play and game (see: Juul, 2013; Ohler & Nieding, 2006; Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006; Calleja, 2010; Sutton-Smith, 1997), and ties in with the motivation theory in particular (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, c1990; Christopher J. Ferguson, 2012; Yee, 2007; Przybylski, et al, 2009). Simply put, skills are also key to players' subjective, perhaps psychological, and cultural enjoyment with videogames and tied up with their motivations for play.

In short, challenge is one aspect of videogames that is permanent and universal, and it anchors both gaming and play with videogames. As such, (gaming) skill is a key feature of play, which is constituted in turn by players' abilities. At the same time, challenge does not explain skills, or why skills are pleasurable, because, as briefly touched upon, although the challenge is predetermined and static, skill is not, as elaborated on below.

Skills as Overcoming Challenges: Fluidity

To approach skills as a player's abilities in overcoming challenges not only allows us to understand the importance of skills in play, but also reveals the fluid and context-dependant nature of skills. Firstly, the concept of gaming skills in each play is contingent on the media content being engaged with. It depends on what rule system is being adopted in a game, and it is also worth noting that challenges come in several different (more likely combinations of) types (Juul, 2005, pp. 106-112; Juul, 2009; Genvo, 2009). These include: reflexes; logical reasoning; strategic planning; and spatial recognition (to name just a few). Each type of challenge requires a different skill set. The game being engaged with during play determines the concept of gaming skills on that occasion.

Secondly, gaming skills are also contingent on how the play progresses. Rule systems in videogames allow players to traverse the space of possibilities with certain degrees of freedom (although limited). There are different skill sets (although such differences could be minor) that players can draw on while tackling the same challenges. In other words, how a player plays their game further frames the concept of gaming skills for a particular scenario of play. Even when a player engages with other players in competitive play, what is contested between players are the results (scores, speed, or 'kills') that are calculated by the rules system, which is not the same as 'actual' skills. The outcome is very much like any sport: although the

final score is certainly indicative of the players' relative skill levels, the scores are *not* measurements of skills. Thirdly, skills are not static. Gaming skills can be refined and improved through practice (gaming), as well as learning from others through the play with videogame briefly discussed above. Indeed, a player's skill level may vary because of contextual factors, such as equipment, environment of gaming or emotions.

To sum up, gaming skills constitute the activity of play because overcoming challenges is a permanent and universal aspect of gaming and one of the key factors that play with videogames revolves around. Yet gaming skills are diverse because of the many different challenges that videogames offer. They are nuanced due to the many possibilities on offer through rule systems and they are as fluid as a gamer's own subjective and self-perceived understanding of their own skills, which are in turn consciously appropriated for any one game. The idea of a metric is inadequate for accounting for all this, not least because a 'one-size-fits-all' approach fails to capture these issues. Furthermore, I argue that a player's play activities are anchored by their self-perception of their own (and others') gaming skills, whilst their motivation for play is framed by their conceptualisations of gaming skills (and vice-versa). Hence in this study, instead of seeking an 'objective', self-contained definition for gaming skills, I aim to approach the subject through players' conceptualisations and self-perceptions. I will discuss both my criticism of 'measuring gaming skill' as well as the theoretical rationale for approaching it as self-perception in greater detail in later chapters.

Skills is perhaps the most problematic and under-researched area in the existing corpus of Games Studies. The industry uses this concept as a quantifiable predictor of a particular player's motivation and choices of games for play (Sykes, 2006); academics argue that skill level is a tangible and measurable matter, which frames how a player actually plays and understands videogames (Juul, 2013; Juul, 2009; Daviault, 2012). I am seeking to reposition it within the other two concepts for a more complex, nuanced, and subjective notion of skills. In addressing skills, I am also speaking to self-perceptions of gaming abilities, issues that may contribute to skills – such as gender, nationality, and gaming choice. In other words, 'skills' offers a framework through which I can interrogate the assumption that gaming skills is a consistent, singular and objectively measurable attribute of a player. My questions are as follows:

1. What does the notion of skill signify for players? How do their understandings of this concept relate to motivation and play? How does the notion of skill emerge

through their play and their motivations for gaming? What is deemed as important or relevant for gamers?

2. How does skill as it emerges here relate to wider conceptualisations? What are the implications of my study for such conceptualisations?

Chapter Outlines

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS starts with a delineation of the methodological position of the study, which I define as a grounded approach rooted within the traditions of Audience Studies. The methodological position is also influenced by what we might call the practice theory school of audience research (Couldry, 2014; Silverstone, 1999, pp. 1-19; Morley, 2007). In particular, this chapter surveys existing videogame ethnography works within these traditions (Thornham, 2011; Walkerdine, 2007; Shaw, 2014), not least because ethnographic methodology is what allows this study to achieve its goal. The concerns of ethnography in terms of inspecting media uses in the context of audience's everyday lives and understanding the videogame medium in its all complexities (as much as possible) are aligned with my aims. **CHAPTER 2** also explains the central method of the gaming-interview employed in this research. The gaming-interview is a method that is arguably unique to the study of videogame players and is a 'twist' on the long-standing method of the interview (Daviault, 2012; Shaw, 2014). As the term indicates, this method invites participants to a gaming session and follows it up with a semi-structured interview. In the discussion, I will unpack the methodological and methodical implications of the inclusion of a gaming session, as well as those of the interview as the core data gathering method (including a review of the interview schedule). In addition to elaborating on methodology and the data collection method, this chapter also addresses participant recruitment and its impacts on all discussions in subsequent chapters. In particular, **CHAPTER 2** sketches out the pivotal issue of 'student participants' as the participants of my study were mostly students (at different levels of study) at the time of interview, and I explore the implications of this demographic in relation to their representative significance and the specificities of a shared student identity that frames my findings and analysis in subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER 3: VIDEOGAME ACQUISITION investigates videogame purchases and acquisitions. Although all players must be practicing it in their everyday engagement with the videogame medium and the activities also receives prominent attention from the gaming community, videogame purchase/acquisition is a largely unexplored topic in academia. **CHAPTER 3** begins with an examination of the factors that might lead to this negligence by academics. It then

explores the four means of videogame purchase/acquisition commented on extensively by the participants, two in each cultural context: pre-orders and sales/second-hand purchases in the West; and normal (premium) purchases and piracy in China. Drawing on Marxist theory on value (Marx, 1999; Adorno, 2005, c1974), Bourdieu's (1984/2010) theory on cultural/social capital, Campbell's (1987) interpretation of consumerism, and Lewis' (2013) conceptualisation of consumer capitalism, this chapter inspects the similarities and differences between how the participants articulate and reflect on two sets of parallel purchase/acquisition practices. The chapter also explores the relationship between participants' accounts and the broader socio-cultural contexts, in particular how each type of purchase/acquisition is framed by the industries (of respective context), as well as how they are presented in the respective gaming cultures. Lastly, this chapter discusses potential ways to take this discussion further, both theoretically and empirically.

CHAPTER 4: MOTIVATION focuses on the concept of *motivatio*n – more specifically, the elements of videogames and play highlighted by the participants in relation to what motivated them to game and play with videogames[6]. I examine the personal, individualised nature that is underlined by the participants' remarks, drawing on Colin Campbell's (1987) notion of 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism'. The second half of this chapter explores a key finding which relates to the fact that although the participants rarely made explicit mention of particular games while discussing motivation factors, strong connections could nevertheless be found between what they explain as motivating factors and other general remarks about specific games. I argue that we could see this in keeping with the embeddedness of the player-videogame relationship in players' lives – a relationship that is maintained through everyday engagement with various aspects and components of the media; this is also consistent with findings of existing ethnographic studies about videogame players (Thornham, 2011; Walkerdine, 2007). I also introduce the notion of 'stratification of knowledge' proposed by Roy Bhaskar (2008) and Andrew Collier (1994). Developed as a theory about scientific knowledge, I will use the concept to understand the three different avenues through which participants and academia discuss the notion of motivation for gaming (as well as gaming and gaming skill): inferred motivation by analysing videogame content; motivation for moment-to-moment gaming sessions; and motivation for engaging with the videogame medium as an everyday leisure activity. This notion will be used throughout the rest of the thesis.

[6] Existing literature on this topic, mostly on motivations for gaming, comes primarily from the field of psychology (Ryan et al, 2006; Andrew K. Przybylski, 2009; Yee, 2007; Christopher J. Ferguson, 2012).

CHAPTER 5: GAMING discusses the participants' remarks about *gaming*. I first review the gaming-interview as a research method. While rapport building is invaluable to any research, I argue that participants' accounts of the gaming sessions could be useful for investigations into players' perceptions of videogame content and how they engage with said content, but it is less useful for studies that focus more on gaming in an everyday context. I argue that this is because gaming sessions in the gaming-interview are motivated by different reasons than in a player's everyday gaming activities. Secondly, I discuss the newer iteration of the 'flow' model (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, c1997), and demonstrate the synergy between the notion of 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' and the 'flow' model. With the two theoretical framework combined, I examine the individualised, personalised, and private nature of gaming expressed in participants' accounts of their everyday gaming activities.

CHAPTER 6: GAMING SKILL explores the concept of *skill*. It opens with a review of the concept: skills are discussed extensively in the gaming community, yet have received limited scholarly attention, which often explores the concept within specific contexts, such as massively multiplayer online (MMO) games (for example: Schrader & McCreery, 2008). This chapter firstly examines how the participants describe their notion of gaming skills. With this in mind, instead of focusing on 'what the participants consider skills to be', this chapter focuses on examining 'how the participants conceptualise skills', for example their views on how skills are developed through the course of playing (both gaming and playing with videogames), and their understanding of the role of skills in their everyday gaming activities. **CHAPTER 6** demonstrates that the concept of skills is built upon the participants' everyday gaming practises, in particular the types of games they play regularly. Meanwhile, participants' views on the development of gaming skills were largely informed by their cultural backgrounds, especially the role that 'natural-born talent' plays in developing gaming skills. Although this approach might not be able to secure an absolute definition of gaming skills, it allows us to explore the ontological nature of skills through investigating how skills shape gaming experiences and how gaming experiences frame skills, which is, as demonstrated above, key to understanding the player-videogame relationship.

CHAPTER 7 serves as conclusion to the thesis and posits suggestions for future studies. In the first half, I summarise the discussions of previous chapters and paint a picture – however rough – of the player-videogame relationship that this study seeks to construct: it is rooted in the everyday life of a player, maintained through interactions with the videogame medium on multiple planes, and as such, it is a relationship understood by participants to be highly personal and individualised. Thus I argue that videogames should not be conceptualised as

'virtual realms' that are secluded from the 'real-world', because videogames can only be experienced in ways that are grounded in materiality. Videogames as media content serves the role of facilitating gaming, but never dictates the experience of gaming or the player-videogame relationship; instead a range of other activities and factors contribute to both. Based on those findings, **CHAPTER 7** revisits the notion of essentialism and echoes the idea that concepts such as (national) cultural differences or gender differences shall never be assumed, but should always be derived from empirical investigations into actual practises (in a broader context). Finally, **CHAPTER 7** discusses three key points to consider in furthering the task of developing a player-centric perspective on the videogame medium: 1) understanding how videogames are perceived by players as media artefacts; 2) how players use videogames to facilitate the types of gaming experiences that they desire against their socio-cultural and political backgrounds; and 3) theorising the role of the videogame medium in players' everyday lives based on those uses as they happen in the physical world.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Methods

Introduction

This chapter discusses the theoretical inspiration and implications behind my methodology and methods. In what follows, I outline the epistemological and ontological positions I take in this study through four specific topics. I outline the methodological inspirations taken from Audiences Studies, in particular the focus on media practises proposed by Williams (1974) that led this study to focus on play; Silverstone's conceptualisation of 'bodily media experiences' (1999), which helps this study locate the concept of skill(s) methodologically; Ang's (1996) emphasis on 'meaning-making', which inspired this study's approach to motivation; and Couldry's 'practice theory' (2014) framework, which shapes the methodological framework for this study. The methodological section ends with a discussion about grounded approach, which constitutes the analytical strategy of this study.

The second section of this chapter addresses the specific methods of this study, taken from these methodological approaches. Here, I elaborate on issues around the interview and interview knowledge, as well as the role of the gaming session as both supportive method and as a data gathering method itself. As suggested in the previous chapter, the thesis is driven by the goal of understanding the player-videogame relationship from a player-centric perspective. To achieve this, I adopt an approach inspired by Audience Studies, through the use of gaming-interviews – a period of time spent observing live gaming by the participant followed by a semi-structured interview. This approach speaks specifically to my central themes of play, skills and motivation as detailed in the previous chapter, enabling the complexities and nuances of these concepts to emerge in ways that a more data-driven or quantitative approach might not. Specifically, the gaming session is designed to build rapport, shared knowledge and familiarity between the researcher and gamer as well as a shared experience, which can be a reference point for reflecting on everyday engagement with the videogame medium. The semi-structured in-depth interview directly invites players to articulate their understandings, and enables them to draw on the gaming experience to elucidate their comments.

The third section of this chapter engages with the ethics of representation and reflectivity, which, to Denzin (2003), Lincoln et al, (2011) and Pillow (2003) raises a number of problem-

atic issues that every qualitative, non-positivist study should be wary of. This chapter concludes with an overview of the recruitment process and a discussion of the demographics of the participants.

Methodology

By methodology I refer to the theoretical underpinnings of the methods, informed by a more general ontological and epistemological stance. For me, methodology dictates the choice and employment of certain methods, the analysis and theorisation of data generated by the chosen methods, and the nature of knowledge gained through analysis and theorisation.

The overall design follows the principles for qualitative inquiry proposed by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), and in particular their ideas of 'capturing the individual's point of view', 'examining constraints of everyday life' and 'securing rich description' (p. 9). These elements are crucial for my study not least because they are more constructive in elucidating the complexity of videogame culture. There are three guiding objectives to my methodology and methods: 1) I want to present players' own perspectives and opinions about play, gaming skills and motivation because I believe much of this is usually inferred by researchers or assumed by the industry; 2) I want to think of gaming and play as located in the players' everyday lives, addressing the issues around 'taking play out of context' discussed earlier; 3) I want to generate rich data through which the key concepts (play, gaming skills and motivation) can emerge rather than be assumed.

Considering that this particular approach to researching player-videogame relationships is much less charted, the research design necessarily embodies the openness of grounded theory methodology. Thus the overall design not only allows me to seek answers, but also allows new concepts and conceptions to arise through the process of research. In this sense, I was able to focus on the three aspects (motivation for play, play and gaming skills) within the frame of players' cultural backgrounds – which includes signifiers such as gender, age, ethnicity, experience and class – but not as overt frameworks; I will discuss this particular approach in greater detail later.

Inspiration: Audience Studies

Players have many faces, not only because Game Studies is a field composed of many different disciplinary lineages that position players differently theoretically, but also because of the sheer complexity of the ecological system of videogame culture. As argued in **CHAPTER 1**, players are the buyers and end users of the media content, therefore they are the driving

force of the current and future existence of the industry (Nichols, 2013), (potential) appreciators of game developers artistry and vision, and the primary contributors to and foundation of games (Gee & Hayes, 2010). But most fundamentally, it is the players' own interactions with videogames that renders videogames meaningful for them (Newman, 2009, pp.510-522). In a similar vein to Newman, this study investigates players' participation in constructing meanings for videogames. In searching of a methodology that could take me to such goal, Audience Studies seemed to provide the most useful inspiration. Here I highlight three more substantial methodological inspirations that were taken from Audience Studies.

Firstly and fundamentally, the study brought players and their engagement with the videogame medium to the centre of the scope, as a response to the overwhelming amount of existing Game Studies literature focuses primarily on videogames as texts. Advocating for an audience-centric approach as a parallel and counter to other research techniques is one of the central agendas of Audience Studies, as Raymond Williams reminds us (1974). Williams' response to mass-media studies' over-reliance on textual analyses and media effects studies was to suggest that more attention needed to be paid to media practices and the relationships between them (p. 20), as well as approaching the practices as they happen (p 25). For the present study, what is important about this intervention is the centricity of 'practice' (play) within a specific temporality and as understood by players.

The second, and arguably most crucial, inspiration this study draws from Audience Studies concerns the ontology of the subject of enquiry. Roger Silverstone (1999) reminds us that media practices/experiences are 'real' and should be investigated as such:

> The first is the need to recognize the reality of experience: that experiences are real, even media experiences. This puts us somewhat at odds with much post-modern thinking which proposes that the world we inhabit is a world seductively and exclusively one of images and simulations. […] In this view we live our lives in symbolic and eternally self-referential spaces which offer us nothing more than the generalities of ersatz and the hyper-real, which offer us only the reproduction and never the original and in so doing deny us our own subjectivity and indeed our capacity to act meaningfully. In such a view we are challenged without our collective failure to distinguish reality from fantasy, and for the, albeit enforced, impoverishment of our imaginative capacities. (p. 9)

The stance that 'experiences are real' is critical to maintain in the study of videogame players. This is because player experiences are often theorised in the same sense as the post-modernist view understands media experiences referred to be Silverstone. In both academic practises and gaming cultures, videogames are often discussed through the framework of game-worlds or concepts such as the virtual world (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al, 2013; Calleja, 2011), and gaming is inspected through lenses such as 'immersion' or the idea of a 'magic circle'. Game-worlds are often conceptualised as digital/virtual worlds that exist in an alternative plane of existence – a plane that is opposed to the 'real-world' or 'real-life'. Within these frameworks, players' experiences of videogames are neither 'real' nor 'original', yet it is so 'life-like' that players always take them as if it was real. Subsequently, this postmodernist conceptualisation of videogames and gaming experiences revives the long-discredited 'hypodermic-needle', which assumes that the gaming experience is completely dictated by the games but not by the players' own actions.

In response to this, my study employs an approach that invites players to offer accounts of their experiences with the videogame medium, whilst also being cognisant of their physical, bodily experience. And this, once again, is under the guidance of Silverstone:

> [Experience] is framed by prior agendas and previous experiences. It is ordered according to norms and classifications that have stood the tests of time and the social. It is interrupted by the unexpected, the unprepared, the event, the catastrophe, by its own vulnerability, by its own inevitable and tragic lack of coherence. Experience is acted out and acted upon. In this sense it is physical, based in the body and on its senses. […] It [the body] is the, non-Cartesian, locus of action, and the locus, too, of those skills and competences without which we become disabled. This has significant implications for how we approach the media, and for how media themselves intrude into bodily experience, for they do intrude, continually, technologically. (1999, p. 10)

In my view, Silverstone's framing of experiences is immensely valuable to the study of videogame players that inspects the players' media/play experiences. Indeed, Silverstone reminds us that the experience of gaming should be investigated in a broader context – not only in relation to the context of socio-cultural background, but also in relation to the context of everyday life, and the context of a player's long-term relationship with the videogame medium. This is because, as I will demonstrate in **CHAPTER 3** and **CHAPTER 6**, the experience of play is also very much framed by individual and subjective 'norms and classifications' that are rooted in personal and public histories.

The concept of bodily aspects should also be reinstated in the study of videogame experiences. Another consequence of the above-discussed post-modernist conceptualisation of videogames and gaming is that players are often presented as digital 'existences of consciousness' at the moment of gaming, since players are totally 'immersed' into the digital game-worlds, whilst nothing else physically around them matters – including their own bodies. This is a misconception. The player-videogame relationship is constructed, maintained and developed physically and bodily through technological and material objects: game-worlds are seen and heard through physical objects, and interacted with through physical interfaces (Ruggill & McAllister, 2011, pp. 16-27). Therefore, bodily aspects and physicality should be investigated, which I do through the lenses of skill, play and motivation, all of which contain and reference these elements. As discussed in the previous chapter, the concept of skill in this study is defined through self-perception, and as such, skill offers a lens through which the players reflected on their experiences with the videogame medium with a bodily self in the centre – bodily not in an exclusively physical sense, but in a sense that connects the physical and the digital.

The third rationale for drawing on Audience studies is that it also offers inspirations in terms how such engagement with media should be approached. Notably, Ien Ang (1996), after reviewing over a decade of her work in the field of Audience Studies, conceptualises 'active audience' as:

> it is in this context [of 'active audience' as a state of being *condemned* to freedom of choices] that the practices of active meaning making in the process of media consumption – as part of creating a 'life-style' for oneself – need to be understood. […] the significance of the new audience studies should be […] in their exploration of how people live within an increasingly media saturated culture, in which they *have* to be active (as choosers and readers, pleasure seekers and interpreters) in order to produce any meaning at all out of the overdose of images thrown before us. (p. 13, emphasis in original)

For Ang, it is the active meaning-making activities carried out by audiences that render media and media content meaningful. As such, an audience-centric approach is not just about placing the practices of gamers at the centre of my focus, it is also about, arguably and more importantly, understanding gaming as processes of meaning-making. In order to elucidate this, my study invited players to talk about *how* they engage with videogames – how they conceptualise skills – as well as their view on the factors/elements that motivated them to

play, and *why* they engage with videogames. Informed by Ang, this study understands the participants' accounts of play, skill and motivation *as* meaning-making. My study tells us how players make sense of their engagement with the videogame medium. In addition, it is important to note that the three framing concepts are all subjective. What is important to elucidate, then, are the ways through which a player identifies and articulates aspects of the player-videogame relationship.

Methodological Framework: Practice Theory

In order to implement the inspirations taken from Audience Studies, I adapted 'practice theory' as the methodological framework for this study. More specifically, this study utilises a version of 'practice theory' proposed by Nick Couldry, which as he explains aims to be:

> as *open as possible* in analysing what practices are out there […] Instead of starting out from the simple division of media research into studying "the text" or the production or reception of "the text", it explores in a more open way the mass of things people do and say (and indeed believe) that are oriented to, or related to, media. (2014, p. 217, italics in original)

Couldry's notion of practise theory provides the openness and exploratory potential nature that is necessary to investigate player-videogame relationships, through interrogating the intricate connections between play, gaming skills and motivation.

In this study, the openness of practice theory enables me to break free from constraints set by the type of games or categories of activities players engage with (such as focusing on MMO players or modders for example), and instead enables me to explore all the different ways through which players engage with all different types of videogames. This is important because, as noted in previous studies (see: Newman, 2008) and as I will demonstrate in later chapters, meaningful interaction with videogames is not just limited to gaming, but incorporates various other forms of engagement with the videogame medium; similarly, players rarely commit themselves to one type of game, let alone one specific game, rather players always play a wide range of different games.

Couldry directs us to consider the rhythms and practices of everyday media use, media content and wider and associated uses and practices (2014, p. 223). These resonate with my central concepts of play, motivation and skills not least because as discussed above, I am interested in the activity of gaming, namely direct engagement with the videogame medium, with additional emphasis on the physical, tactile aspects. The first dimension highlighted in

Couldry's model also further directs attention towards issues of space, time, and how gaming activities are planned and their positions in broader contexts, as he explains:

> It makes a great difference whether any particular act of media consumption is part of a continuous flow or a discrete act, anticipated in time or marked off from the day's activities in some other way; the patterning of media use in time may also be overlaid on the patterning of space (Bakardjeva, 2005; Bengstsson, 2006). (2014, p. 223, references in original)

As Couldry also reminds us, examining the 'relative thickness and thinness of the intertextual activity around particular texts' (2014, p. 224) is crucial for understanding audiences' practices that involve highly convergent media formats, because contemporary media practices are rarely stand-alone incidences but usually involve engaging with a range of different parallel media (content). Aside from videogames themselves, the medium also has strong presence through and within both traditional media forms (such as magazines) *and* digital formats (such as online articles, social media sharing and internet videos, on demand or live-streaming). Videogames themselves are also digital artefacts, which need to be acquired by players in some way.

We should also note, following Thornham's work , that player-videogame relationships are always constructed within a socio-cultural context, and based on existing socio-cultural beliefs and values (2011, pp. 150-152). For the participants of my study, their relationships with the videogame medium have developed over time and alongside their own socio-cultural identities – the vast majority of them told me that videogames were something they grew up with. This observation demands that this study pays attention to broader socio-cultural contexts that inform and shape the participants' play practises as well their accounts of their relationships with the videogame medium. While the importance of culturally/nationally specific gaming cultures are immediately obvious through my work, other socio-cultural institutes (such as shared attitudes towards consumerism and the general social and economic structure of university students' everyday lives) also appear to play certain roles. In a way, this study takes notice of the third dimension of 'the wider uses and practice contexts served by, or associated with those practices' in Couldry's framework, and expands it further beyond the boundaries of the immediate context of media (practices).

Methods

As suggested earlier in this chapter, my two central methods incorporate an hour-long gaming session in which participants chose and played a game (from a choice of four) followed

by a semi-structured audio-recorded hour-long interview. I videoed the gaming sessions, and they formed important frameworks for the subsequent analysis of the interviews. Before going on to discuss the two methods and the sequence in which they were carried out, it should be noted that I pilot tested focus groups, but the method was not used in the final research.

Piloted Method: Focus Group

The initial research design had a stronger focus on cultural comparison, which demanded a research method that aimed to explore shared understandings of participants of certain socio-cultural groups. As such, focus groups were initially planned as a third research method, as they are considered to be amongst the better research methods in accomplishing this task (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011). While relatively experienced in using gaming-interviews, I was less familiar with focus group as an academic research method. Hence, to better gauge the effectiveness of focus groups for this study, as well as to better understand their strengths and weaknesses, I conducted a pilot across three focus groups, with participants recruited through opportunity sampling (participants were students on a videogame-related module). The first two focus groups each consisted of two female participants, the third focus group had five male participants. All focus groups were carried out on the University of Leeds campus and video recorded with participants' permission.

The pilots indicated that focus groups are indeed highly effective in exploring shared understandings, but they neither allowed me to focus on a player's everyday gaming activities, nor offered the space for a player to discuss their personal understandings of the three key concepts in great depth. Although such weaknesses were expected, the pilots suggested that the trade-off was rather pronounced in this particular case – the focus group participants seemed to be actually avoiding discussing either topic in great detail. In retrospect, this may have been due to the highly personal and private nature of the player-videogame relation.

Thus is was determined that focus groups would be much less useful for this research compared to other methods. This is because the core methodology of this study requires methods to be able to secure rich and detailed data, namely players' accounts of their everyday gaming and their understandings of the three key concepts. Therefore, I decided not to use focus groups and instead concentrate on gaming-interviews. Three focus group participants returned for gaming-interviews, whereas the other six did not. Focus group interview data was not used in subsequent chapters, not only because the data was collected under a different context, but also because the data did not provide much insight into either topic due to the nature of the focus group method.

Gaming-Interview: Gaming Session

The semi-structured interview was the primary method for this study, but it was preceded by a gaming session, in which participants were invited to play a videogame for about 60 minutes. This particular combination of a gaming session and an interview is known as a 'gaming interview' (Shaw, 2014, p. 48), and is usually employed for two purposes. First, it is utilised to investigate participants' perceptions/understanding/meaning-making of particular media content (played during the gaming session), such as in Daviault's (2012) study, which investigates the relationships between players' gaming experiences and their perception of a particular Permanent Non-Player Character (PNPC)[7]. Second, it is used to provoke a more 'productive' interview session, as the gaming session provides the interviewer and interviewee with prompts and references and also builds rapport through a shared experience, as in Shaw's study (2014).

Use of this method is also a way to acknowledge the impossibility of recreating a 'real-life' gaming scenario, not least because of the impact that the investigator's presence would have on such a gaming session. The gaming session was not analysed as an object of study in recognition of these issues – I do not think it represents or replicates the experiences of gaming for my participants particularly well. Instead, it was important as a backdrop and reference for the later interview, and to offer some contextual information pertaining to, for example, motivations, play and skills, which could be further developed through the interview.

For the gaming sessions, I offered the participants four games to choose from: **LEGEND OF ZELDA: WINDWAKER HD** (Nintendo, 2013), **BAYONETTA 2** (Platinum Games, 2014), **DARK SOULS 2** (From Software, 2013) and **THE LAST OF US** (Naughty Dog, 2013). These games were chosen because they involved a range of abilities and genres, whilst also attempting to create an environment where an immediate choice was to be made in a specific context.

Generally speaking and on reflection, although this study does not seek to investigate participants' perceptions of specific games, by offering these four choices, I elicited a number of issues around choice-making for gaming (for example, assumptions about preferences and aesthetics, or around skill based preferences and difficulty). By asking participants to choose a specific game to play, I also prompted questions around how and if gaming choice relates

[7] Gaming interviews are also widely used in commercial context to get feedback from players - although the industry usually employs professional testers rather than randomly selected consumers/participants.

to wider motivations and understandings of gaming skills (for example, whether the perception of skill is contingent on the actual activity of gaming). Each participant was encouraged to talk about the parameters on which their choice(s) was made, and this opened up a number of interesting avenues for discussion. These games are composed in a way that reflects a number of assumptions about players made by the industry – the four games vary greatly in both difficulty and aesthetics, and are promoted through the targeting of a specific audience (see Appendix 3). This offered a discursive entry point to discuss a range of perspectives through, for example, a comparison between the industry's (and to some extent the gaming public's) assumptions around gender, age, and cultural notions of 'gaming skills' based preferences, market demographics and the players' own rationales for gaming. For example, a common assumption is that a female player typically prefers games with more 'cute' presentation and 'less violent' gameplay – amongst the four games, **LEGEND OF ZELDA: WINDWAKER** is a good example of such a game. Then it would be very interesting to compare such an assumption with female participants' remarks for choosing – or not choosing – this game for their gaming session. However, these aspects are not discussed in this thesis, as its focus is on the participants' engagement with the videogame medium in their everyday lives. I will further elaborate on the reasoning behind this decision in **CHAPTER 5** as it is rooted in how this study understands the notion of 'everyday play activities'.

The hour-long gaming session was also intended for rapport building, and this was perhaps its most useful function within my study. It created a readily available discussion point by allowing me to open the interview with a set of rather impersonal questions about their immediate gaming experience ('what do you think about the game (that you have just played)?' 'What is good and bad about it?'). Furthermore, as the gaming session mimicked without exactly replicating everyday gaming (not least because of the staged nature of it, the change in context, and lack of familiarity with the game), it also provided participants with 'handles', or 'entrances' to talk about all three key concepts, which perhaps otherwise would have appeared somewhat abstract.

Looking back on the overall data collection process, these scenarios did accomplish the above-mentioned goals, but in rather interesting and somewhat unexpected ways. Foremost, the process of 'making a choice' did not occur for the majority of the Chinese participants, who instead asked me to choose a game for them for their gaming sessions. The main reason they gave, was that none of the four games were known to them. My inference is that this is because those games were not released in China and therefore received little-to-no marketing in China. While Chinese fans of these games certainly exist, the player-driven interests in

these games clearly did not propel them into the more popular and visible status that they hold in the West. Following this, there are two further issues to note. The first implication is that it immediately prompted me to reconsider my own position both in relation to the other gamers and as a Chinese man living in the UK, not least because I did have wider awareness and knowledge of these games. In considering this, while my initial interest in the videogame medium was certainly developed in Chinese gaming culture, my current relationship with the videogame medium is more rooted in Western gaming culture due to both my academic upbringing and recent experiences. I will return to this later, in the ethics section of this chapter.

The second and perhaps more significant implication is that this scenario also reminds us that the notion of a choice between games is rarely as straightforward as it is sometimes conceptualised. Instead, and as my experiences suggest, the idea of a choice was heavily informed by the socio-cultural conditions of the scenario and the fact that I was asking gamers to make a choice. But also the idea of choice, thinking more globally and culturally, is also heavily informed by economic and social contexts not least because a game has to be available in order to be played. On this note, it indicates that the choice of a game in gaming is not a simple, unproblematic reflection of desire or preference as some studies have led us to believe. This idea will be revisited throughout this thesis, particularly in **CHAPTER 4: MOTIVATION** and **CHAPTER 3: PURCHASE/ACQUISITION**.

There are two further issues to note about the gaming sessions. The first is that even though I observed over 40 gaming sessions, I found it extremely difficult to gauge how skilled a participant was. Indeed I was only able to visibly identify 2 participants whom I would say were particularly skilled at **DARK SOULS II** out of the 7 participants who chose the game for their gaming session. In other words, skill carries few visible or performative signifiers that can be identified through observation. The gaming sessions indicated that to do so is difficult even within the confines of one particular game, even simply understanding it as 'capability of playing the game' and disregarding all the nuances; I will return to this in **CHAPTER 5: GAMING**. The second issue is that a player's in-game 'performance' could indeed reflect their skill-level, but this does not necessarily relate to their wider gaming experiences or skills, for example what they find enjoyable, frustrating or in relation to their perceptions of games and skills.

A larger ambition of this study was to evolve this particular method of the gaming session out of its subsidiary (albeit necessary) status as a framework for the subsequent gaming-interview. One of the original rationales for a gaming session was to explore the methodological possibilities of the gaming session. While the gaming session for this study remains

most prominently as a precursor for the gaming interview, I do discuss some meaningful methodological insights, which I will return to in **CHAPTER 5: GAMING**.

Gaming-Interview: Semi-structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the core data gathering method for a number of reasons. As one of the more widely used research methods in the Social Sciences (Fontana & Frey, 2008; Gillham, 2000), and within wider ethnographies of videogames (Thornham, 2011; Walkerdine, 2009), semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore personal experiences in a constructed yet informal way, within a setting that mimics the occurrence of daily conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). More importantly, semi-structured interviews invite participants to dialogically contribute to the construction of knowledge with their understandings and opinions (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). As Kvale and Brinkmann summarise:

> A semi-structured live world interview attempts to understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects' own perspectives. This kind of interview seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewees' live world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena. (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27)

Given that this study aims to take a player-centric approach to investigate player-videogame relationships through their own perspectives, semi-structured interviews are by far the best method, not least because they allow me to invite players to talk about their own everyday play activities (media practices) in their own words.

The semi-structured interview also has a number of synergies with the aims of grounded theory as Charmaz argues:

> Both grounded theory methods and intensive interview are open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted. Researchers adopt intensive interviewing precisely because it facilitates conducting an open-ended, in-depth exploration of an area in which the interviewee has substantial experience. (Charmaz, 2014, p. 85)

For this project, the method of semi-structured/intensive interview offers two clear benefits that enhance grounded theory. Firstly, it allows researchers to directly reach participants 'who have first-hand experience that fits the research topic' for an 'in-depth exploration' of their experiences. Secondly, its openness allows for the following up of 'unanticipated areas of inquiry, hints, and implicit views and accounts of actions' (Charmaz, 2014, p. 56). Both

benefits are crucial in facilitating the goal of grounded theory approach: to develop new conceptualisations and theorisations. Since semi-structured interviews were the main data collection method, it is also worthwhile discussing the nature of the interview data here too.

This study subscribes to Denzin's view of interview data, that each interview generates data in a very specific setting through the dialogue between the interviewee and interviewer:

> The interview is an active text, a site where meaning is created and performed […] every interview text selectively and unsystematically reconstructs that world, tells and performs a story according to its own version of truth and narrative logic. (2003, p. 81)

This study understands participants' remarks as 'articulations' but not necessarily as 'experiences' or 'facts'. In so doing, it recognises the interview data as 'stories' that players tell about themselves and about videogames. Following this, and by interrogating how stories are told, we are able to catch a glimpse into how relationships with the videogame medium are maintained through everyday gaming and through playing with videogames. We can seek to understand how players perceive and conceptualise gaming skill(s), and how they make sense of their relationships with the videogame medium – and by extension of this, what the factors are that motivate them to play.

To achieve this goal, an interview schedule was drafted, as seen in **APPENDIX 6**. The schedule comprised of lists of potential questions, each relating to one or more of the three key concepts, namely motivation, play, and skills. Questions were initially drafted based on my own experiences, then refined against research drawn from existing literature. Additionally, questions aimed at inviting participants to talk about their everyday play activities were included. For example, questions focused on 'play with videogames' also invited participants to talk about their everyday use of hardware and purchase/acquisition activities. It should be noted that, as this study employed a methodology that prioritised openness, such openness translated into the interview schedule in three ways.

Firstly, although questions were informed both by literature and my personal gaming experiences, they were all formulated to be as concise as possible and devoid of any theoretical terms, to avoid 'putting my words into a participant's mouth'. Secondly, although not explicitly documented in the interview schedule, I often asked my participants to elaborate on their remarks when they were either short or (in my view) relied on expressions commonly used in gaming cultural (for example 'balance', or 'playability', or 'hard-but-fair'), even though I

might understand what they meant by those terms. This allowed me to circumvent my existing knowledge about the videogame medium as a player myself. Thirdly, the interview schedule functioned more as a point of reference rather than a 'step-by-step' instruction to be strictly followed. In other words, during interviews, I sought to follow neither the exact sequence nor wording of the questions listed in **APPENDIX 6**. Rather, the schedule was used as a checklist to ensure all topics were covered with participants during interviews.

Interview sessions were carried out directly after gaming sessions, unless the participant requested otherwise. Additionally, drinks and snacks were provided, and an individual interview session typically lasted 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted in the language preferred by the participants, including English and Chinese. Interviews were carried out in a relaxed manner that resembled a conversation between two players, talking about games and game play. This was possible thanks to the rapport building brought about by the gaming session. To maintain the flow of conversation, I sometimes responded to participants with my own experiences and/or opinions. However, I was always very cautious about limiting the length and depth of my inputs, so that they would not take over the interviews.

Interviews provided the majority of data for this study. All interviews conducted in English were fully transcribed, whereas interviews conducted in Chinese were transcribed in parts that were required for writing up. Although interviews in Chinese were not fully transcribed, my native Chinese speaker status enabled me to carry out analyses efficiently through repeated listening and appropriate note taking.

Epistemological Stance and Approach to Analyses

I will firstly address the epistemological stance to which this study subscribes. This is a topic worth addressing in some detail because this study makes a commitment to the player-centric perspective with the openness of a grounded approach – it also aims to examine the relation between players' understanding and the socio-cultural and political contexts in which their everyday engagement with the videogame medium are formed and maintained. Furthermore, this study made the intellectual commitment and promise to participants to let players speak for themselves. In fact, several participants specified during the interviews that the phrase 'let us players speak for ourselves' – used in the participants' recruitment flyer and information sheets – was one of the factors that motivated them to participate in this research. Therefore, it is important to discuss how this study understands the analytical process.

Generally speaking, this study is underscored by a critical realist epistemology, which is spear-headed by scholars such as Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Collier, and Margret Archer. Fundamentally, critical realism is an ontological and epistemological stance which seeks to both critique and connect the epistemological stances of 'classical empiricism', represented by Hume and his successors, and that of 'transcendental idealism', represented by Kant and his successors (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 17). Bhaskar refers to this stance as 'transcendental realism' (pp. 16-18). To further address these concepts would require me to engage with a series of philosophical debates that is well beyond the scope of this study, and well documented elsewhere (see: Collier, 1994; Archer, 1995; Elder-Vass, 2007; 2010), therefore I will not seek to repeat those discussions here. Instead, I will focus on the implication on analyses of data.

To put it in simple social science terms, the epistemological position of critical realism seeks to balance 'humanism, which sees human agency as everything, and structuralism, which sees social structure as everything' (Collier, 1994, p. 141). Following Marx, it also sees a society as both a 'collection of individuals' and an expression of 'the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand' (Marx, 1973, p. 265, cited in Collier, 1994, p. 139). Moreover, it points out that such relations (namely social structure) do not exist independently from individuals' agencies, both in terms of activities and understandings of such activities (Collier, 1994, pp. 150-151). However, critical realism argues that the agency is not unconstrained, but is informed by and functions within the social structures.

More importantly, it further points out that an individual is not always fully aware of all contextual structures or psychological processes behind it (Bhaskar, 1986, p. 126), since we can only perceive and understand our experiences within the time and space in which we physically exist. Indeed, as Collier suggests, 'while we may know under one descriptor what we are doing […], there may be other and true and relevant descriptors under which we (literally) do not know what we are doing' (1994, p. 160). For example, a Chinese person making the hand gesture of extending thumb and little finger with the middle three fingers curled up is most likely to signify the number six. Yet it is possible that this person would not be aware that, for people from other cultures, this gesture could be a friendly greeting, have a less friendly connotation, or simply mean nothing. Therefore, a critical realist approach not only demands faithful interpretation of interview data, but also requires examination of the sociocultural and political structures reflected in such data.

In a critical realist view, the two practices are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Instead, it proposes a complementary relationship between the interpretations of research participants

on the one hand, and the academic theory and concepts that are drawn upon to analyse and explain their perspectives and practices on the other. Faithful interpretation involves capturing the nuanced and sophisticated nature of audience-media relations through open questions, whereas academic theories and concepts enable a systematic analysis of the richness of everyday media practice and understanding the audience-media relation from the perspective of the audience.

The analytical strategy of this study resembles what is commonly known as thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Additionally, in adherence to the openness demanded by this study's methodology, the themes were not determined before analysis, but emerged from participants' own accounts through the process of analysis. Throughout the entire analytical process, there were two maim iterations of this model. The first iteration was constructed around the three key concepts of motivation, play, and skill, since questions were drafted around everyday engagement with the videogame medium, rather than these concepts. Themes such as 'motivation for reading guides', 'gaming as a backdrop for socialisation', and 'skills at overcoming challenges' emerged as analysis progressed. This iteration resulted in over 30 relatively self-contained themes that encompassed various types of everyday engagement with the videogame medium, each of which could help us better understand the player-videogame relation. However, as those themes emerged, it became evident that such themes also needed a framework to not only theoretically organise them (and the clusters of participants' remarks they represent) in relation to the three key concepts, but also to enable me to discuss how those themes (and remarks) relate to each other, and how they contribute to a coherent, systematic examination of the player-videogame relation from the perspective of players.

The framework chosen for this study was developed from the critical realist concept of 'stratification of knowledge'. The notion of stratification (of knowledge) used in this thesis was developed by critical realist Roy Bhaskar to explain the nature of scientific knowledge generated by different levels of scientific disciplines and paradigms, and to examine the emergence of scientific discoveries behind such developments as social activities (Bhaskar, 2008). The example Bhaskar uses to illustrate this concept is that of a chemical reaction and the evolution of our understanding from seeing it as the change of substance to the change of atoms, then the exchange of electrons and atom structure, and then to sub-atomic theories.

This iteration of stratification is proposed by Collier, which he refers to as the 'tree of science', with each level being its own stratum (1994, pp. 130-134). A crude replica of such a tree would be:

> Psychological and semiological sciences
> Social sciences
> Biological sciences
> Molecular sciences
> (Collier, 1994, p. 132)

Setting aside the exact content of the tree – as Collier notes, it is contestable because it is 'oversimplifying a lot' (Collier, 1994, p. 132) – let us instead focus on the purpose of it. As Bhaskar's stratification aims to address the evolution and emergence of scientific theories, Collier's 'tree' focuses primarily on explaining the relationship between existing disciplines that all aim to explain the world in which we live. Collier argues that there are three relationships held between strata: the first is 'ontological presupposition', whereby one stratum could not exist without the other(s) (1994, p. 131), for example a human as a social being could not exist without biological matters; the second is 'non-transitive vertical explanation', where one stratum could explain its adjacent one, but does not explain ones that are further apart (p. 131), for example molecular theories could explain biological changes, such as aging, but could not explain social phenomena, such as how our society deals with aging culturally or politically; the third is 'composition', by which Collier means that if a stratum is ontologically composed of other strata, it would be composed of elements of the strata (p. 132), again using humans as social beings as an example – because humans exist biologically, a human (although a higher stratum concept) is always composed of biological matter. In many ways, Collier's 'tree' is comparable to notions such as 'incommensurability of scientific theories' as proposed by Kuhn (1962, c.2012).

In this study, the 'tree' consists of three strata, which are as follows:

Stratum One	Perceptions of (Specific) Videogame Content
Stratum Two	Moment-to-Moment Interactions with Videogames
Stratum Three	Player-Videogame Relation in Everyday Context

The first stratum consists of instances in which participants describe their perceptions of specific videogame content, for example commenting on certain representational elements or rule-systems. Such remarks were most common when participants talked about the strengths and weaknesses of certain games, for example the game they played during the gaming session, or descriptions of games they had recently played. The second stratum refers to participants' remarks about their moment-to-moment interactions with videogames. This includes both gaming and playing-with-videogames, such as they did during gaming in-game, their accounts of recent gaming experiences, as well as specific cases of purchasing, reading guides, and talking about games with friends. The third stratum contains participants' more general comments that were not about specific games or interactions with them, for example their responses to the questions: 'why do you play videogames?', and 'do you think gaming skill is important?' It should be noted that the composition of strata was not taken from the literature, but emerged during analysis. In other words, the stratification model was introduced to provide a structure to the three ways in which participants talked about the videogame medium during interviews.

The stratification of knowledge model was chosen for three reasons. Firstly, the three stratum described above encompassed all data collected and themes that emerged during initial analysis. Additional established theoretical concepts – that is to say concepts about videogames, motivation, play, or skill – were not imposed on the themes that emerged from participants' remarks, but they provided a framework to illustrate relations between these themes. Secondly, because it does not introduce established theoretical concepts about motivation, play or skills, this framework does not impede the openness and grounded nature of the study as demanded by grounded theory. Similarly, it should be noted that there are no rigorous boundaries between each stratum, meaning one remark/theme could sit across two or all three strata.

Thirdly and most importantly, this framework and its three principles helped this study to better understand its data. The three principles – 1) ontological presumption; 2) non-vertical explanation; and 3) composition – also apply. In this model, the higher stratum could only exist on the basis of the lower strata, thus an everyday relation with the videogame medium could only be maintained through moment-to-moment interaction with videogames (including gaming and playing-with-videogames), and a players' moment-to-moment interaction with videogames is built on their perception of (particular) videogame content. Conversely, the third principle, composition, also holds true, as everyday player-videogame relations are always composed of moment-to-moment interactions with videogames, and perception of

videogames is an integral aspect of this. Although seemingly straightforward, the two principles indicate that the ontological nature of the participants' remarks could be theorised through the stratification framework.

The second principle, 'non-transitive vertical explanation', is where the greatest value of the stratification model for this study lies. This principle suggests that, while one stratum could inform about other strata, it could not replace the other strata. In relation to this study, this means that a player's perception of a certain videogame informs but does not determine what they would do when actually playing it, and their moment-to-moment gaming contributes does not reflect every aspect of their relation with the videogame medium in more general terms. Understanding this principle is crucial to data analysis for this study, because it aims to examine one particular stratum – the player-videogame relation – in an everyday context, from the perspective of players. Thus I can more effectively identify proper direction for analysing interview data of different strata. That is not to say that I ignored remarks about moment-to-moment gaming and players' perceptions of certain game content. Instead, such remarks were used to contextualise and further elaborate on participants' remarks about their relations with the videogame medium in a more general sense.

The stratification model offers a theoretical structure to categorise data, which allows for more efficient, concise, and comprehensive analysis in keeping with the grounded and open nature of the methodological framework. And because this framework is devised to theorise the ontological nature of research data, this model is also useful for a meta-literature review, in terms of helping to better examine which of the three strata a study contributes to, and how said study relates to the existing corpus of knowledge. I will return to this in Chapter 7.

As Audience Studies and practice theory point out what data to collect, the grounded theory approach ensures the openness necessary to secure rich and deep data. And the critical realism perspective enables this study to systematically examine the nuanced and multi-layered player-videogame relation from the perspective of players through academic theories and concepts. Essentially, what this study seeks to achieve is to comprehensively present a way of understanding the player-videogame relation.

Reflection on Positionality

Secondly, the underlying epistemology of the methodological framework requires me to re-examine my own position with, or within, the community I belong to (Ang, 1996, p. 47). This is considered to be an effort to address the fallacy of positivist methodology (Madison, 2005,

p. 12), which often operates on the assumption that researchers themselves are always 'neutral', explicitly or implicitly (see: Lincoln et al, 2011). This is particularly important to the present research, as my own position is a messy one in the context of this study, in both positive and negative terms.

To briefly extrapolate: I am a Chinese male who has been playing videogames continuously for more than two decades. In addition, I have been travelling between Western and East-Asian gaming cultures for over half a decade, and at the time of these interviews, I had been living in Europe for about four years cumulatively. In many ways, it could be argued that I am indigenous to both gaming cultures. Giving the still-lingering stigma about the videogame medium, this seemed to help me to initiate conversations about play, skill(s) and motivation, especially considering, as this thesis demonstrates, that all three concepts have certain degrees of privacy attached to them.

In practise, this position allowed me to connect and communicate with all participants of both cultural backgrounds fairly easily – because we shared the same vocabulary about videogames, we had similar experiences. As signposted above, the first 15 years of my gaming life took place primarily in China, and as such offered me a similar gaming and cultural context as my Chinese participants, as the majority of them are only 2-4 years younger than me. In keeping with the Chinese participants, I also developed gaming interests in China. Furthermore, because the vast majority of the Chinese participants were MA students in the UK and had recently graduated from Chinese universities at the time of the interviews, their remarks drew heavily on their gaming activities during their four-year-long university studies in China. Hence my first-hand experience of gaming during my university time in China resonated with their experiences and allowed me to analyse the Chinese participants' remarks more comprehensively and with greater knowledge and nuance. Since leaving China I have also played videogames and engaged with gaming cultures in Western contexts. For the past four years (1 year in Germany and 3 years in the UK), this has been the context of my gaming experience and consequently I have a working knowledge of habits and conventions, discourse and the popular imagery around gaming in a Western context.

My personal experiences as a player also leave me somewhere in-between the Eastern/Chinese gaming culture and the Western/British gaming culture, making me simultaneously indigenous and exotic to both gaming cultures. More specifically, as I spent my early years of gaming in China, the gaming culture takes a rather different trajectory of development than the West**,** and this meant I sometimes had to rely on external materials to fully appreciate

the nostalgia expressed by Western participants. Meanwhile, interviewing Chinese participants was also a process of re-familiarising myself with the Chinese gaming culture – my contemporary experience was not always in synchronisation with theirs, since by then recent experiences with the videogame medium and gaming culture were primarily Western based. Simply put, reflecting on my position to the gaming cultures of the UK/West and Chinese/East was to remind myself to remain attentive to the nuances within participant remarks.

Indeed, as Pillow (2003) observes, (acknowledging one's position as) being an 'insider' – or an 'outsider', for that matter – further complicates the matter of reflexivity (p. 185). In the case of this study, my personal experience of being a player also led me to share the same strong desire with the participants of defending, justifying and celebrating play as a cultural activity. Similarly, if 'letting players speak for themselves' is a process of 'empowering' the participants, it also puts me in a privileged position in relation to them. Regardless of my intentions, as a researcher I hold the power and responsibility to interpret their words. This, according to Pillow (2003), could lead to a situation where 'the act of reflexivity may perpetuate a colonial relationship while at the same time attempting to mask this power over the subject' (p. 185). In other words, I need to be constantly aware of not reducing the complicated and nuanced accounts down to those only resonant with my own experiences, nor only using participants' words that reaffirm my own views of play, skill(s) and motivation.

Aside from my own somewhat messy position between the Chinese and Western gaming culture, reflexivity is arguably a necessity to the study of videogames and players in more general terms, because the field is still very much at its early stages of development. As such, many terms used by both academia and the gaming culture to describe the experience of gaming and the player-videogame relationship are rather ambiguous in terms of meaning, such as 'magic circle' (Calleja, 2011, pp. 46-53), 'immersion' (Calleja, 2011, pp. 17-36), 'narrative' (Juul, 2005, pp. 156-160), or 'gaming-skills/expertise' (Schrader & McCreery, 2008). Moreover, as I will demonstrate throughout the thesis, players understand such terms through their personal and individualised gaming activities. This demands that a study remains cautious in interpreting player's words, especially when considering taking them at face-value. For example – as I discuss in **CHAPTER 4: SKILLS** – are there really any games that could be played without any 'skills', as many of the participants suggested? Or it is the case that the term 'skills' has different meanings for academia compared with the gaming culture?

All these issues add further nuance and depth to this project, and as Lynch (2000) points out, if we only see reflexivity as something that could be addressed by 'some positions, texts or

analysts' (p. 47), which is to say that reflexivity is to be accounted for through simple addition of text, it would achieve nothing but the weaving of a pretentious guise for what is actually the imposition of one's own view on the 'subject'. It is on this ground that I see the issues of my position as a matter of ethics. Reflecting on my position works to 'unsettle' myself during the process of interpreting participants' words and activities. Indeed, as Pillow (2003) points out, reflexivity is not meant to make us comfortable:

> Uncomfortable reflexivity, then, is not about better methods, or about whether we can represent people better but, as Visweswaran states, 'whether we can be accountable to people's struggles for self-presentation and self-determination' (1994, p. 32) – including our own selves. This is not easy or comfortable work and thus should not be situated as such. (p. 193, original reference amended to fit Harvard style)

The idea of uncomfortable reflexivity, I would argue, also speaks to all three issues raised above concerning ethics: there is no simple tactic that could guarantee a perfect balance between presenting participants as individuals and inferring from what they say something about their respective sociocultural groups. Similarly, there is no unambiguous clear line to draw between a player's remarks that should be taken at face value and a player's remarks that should be interrogated further for 'the meaning beneath'. The only thing we can do is constantly remind ourselves of the intellectual commitment and audience-centric perspective as well as the limitations of these related methods. This should be uncomfortable and unsettling, especially considering the multi-dimensional nature of gaming. But unsettling myself with the struggle of representation of participants and un-easing myself with reflexivity is what I am trying to do throughout this thesis.

Recruitment and the Demographic of Participants

Between 2014 and 2015, a total of 50 players participated in this study. They contributed to 44 sets of gaming/interview recordings. In terms of the demographics, of the 50 participants, 20 were Chinese, 2 were Japanese, and 22 were British or had been living in UK for an extensive period of time since their childhood; the rest were of European origin. In terms of gender, 20 were female, 10 of whom were Chinese. The vast majority of participants were in their 20s, and the vast majority (except 2) were students at the time of data collection. Although relatively evenly divided in terms of gender and nationality, there was a clear bias in terms of age and experience. In what follows I detail the rationale for this.

The first thing to note is that my participants were self-selecting; the only two 'variables' I intentionally adjusted for were gender and nationality. To a certain extent, this particular demographic was generated by the central self-selecting anchor of being 'someone who plays videogames (of any sorts)' – much in the same vein as Gary's (2016) call for a non-fan centred Audience Studies. Nationality was introduced only to take advantages of both the particularly prominent population of Chinese masters' students, and my own socio-cultural background. Nationality emerged from the study as a framework for analysis and following this, I began to more actively recruit Chinese and British people. This also explains the small divergence from these demographics in terms of nationality. As the following chapters demonstrate, bringing the perspective of Chinese players into the mix and introducing an element of international comparability into this study has indeed produced some rather fruitful discussions concerning all three concepts: play, skill(s) and motivation. Gender was introduced as a response to previous player-centric studies (Walkerdine, 2007; Thornham, 2011)**,** but unlike nationality, gender did not emerge as a prominent framework for participants' articulations and comments. This is certainly not to imply that gender was not a signifier but rather I suggest that gender is incorporated into and more subtle than cultural differences, and so it emerges through this framework.

The second thing to note, as mentioned above, was that almost all participants were university students at the time of the interviews. While university students as participants share more cultural-social backgrounds than randomly sampled ones, those shared aspects [such as age, education, social status (very broadly speaking)] are not the foci of this study. Their demographic resonances allowed me to gear the overall design more precisely towards the aspects of cultural backgrounds that are the focus of this study (national socio-cultural backgrounds) and gaming skill(s). Therefore the overall design can generate deeper data on the motivations, play and gaming skill(s), and also use the limited time and resources more productively in speaking to the research questions of this particular study, thus eventually more constructively fulfilling the research goals.

A third thing to note is the participant-demographics' relative position to the assumed general demographic of players. Despite recent studies that indicate videogames are actually played by people of different age groups (Pearce, 2008; Hjorth, et al, 2013) and social classes (DeVane & Squire, 2008; Shaw, 2013), university students are still representative of the target demographic the industry is aiming at – the so-called digital 'natives' who are relatively financially independent and have less work pressure (Alvisi, 2006; Newman, 2013, pp. 49-73). And as I discussed above, this demographic is also the assumed player demographic in many

academic discussions (Shaw, 2010; Pearce, 2008). As the goal of this study is to propose an alternative path to understand why players play, I consider such overlapping to be an opportunity to contest the real potential of the player-centred methodology in developing our knowledge, by demonstrating how videogames, play and players could be conceptualised differently even by simply looking at exactly the same demographic.

Lastly, in terms of the Chinese participants, more notable than their nationality or status as students, is the exact stage of student life they were at. The Chinese participants were all Master of Arts (MA) students. They were recruited during the early stage (first month) of their one-year degree programmes. One could argue that they were in a particular transition stage during the time of interview, as they were involved in the process of coping with their new temporal diasporic identities; some participants indeed commented on this issue during interviews. These characteristics may have an impact on several levels: on macro level, it is highly debatable whether their remarks should be interpreted through the lens of (temporal) diaspora, considering the rather short time they had lived in UK. In fact, as far as I could tell, their accounts were primarily based on their engagement with the medium that were carried out in China; very few Chinese participants made explicit notes about 'what has changed since I arrived in the UK'. Furthermore, there were no salient indications of identity maintenance through engagement with media, as often found in other diaspora studies (like Ruddock, 2007, pp. 70-74). Therefore, this study in principle considers that the Chinese participants' remarks actually reflect the player-videogame relation in a Chinese context in a more general sense[8].

Overall, I consider the participant pool, in combination with the methods, to be sufficient in generating the rich data the methodology requires to achieve the three goals mentioned above: firstly, to present players' own perspectives and opinions about play, gaming skills and motivation; secondly to discuss gaming and play as located in the players' everyday lives; and thirdly to allow the key concepts (play, gaming skills and motivation) to emerge.

This combination of methodology and methods was able to generate a set of rich data that spoke directly to the research questions raised by this study (as detailed in **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**), in the specific manner that was intended – from the players' own perspective.

[8] Interview with non-Chinese participants were carried out in English, whereas interviews with Chinese participants were carried out in Chinese. Interviews were then transcribed and translated into English by me.

Indeed, in retrospect, although certain aspects could have been executed differently, it nevertheless served the purpose of this study more than competently, as I will evidence throughout the following thesis.

Chapter 3: Videogame Acquisition

Introduction

In most writing about videogames, whether outside of or within academia, *access* to gaming media is implicitly taken for granted. Scholars and commentators discuss the artistic value in their representations/mechanisms (Smuts, 2005; Gee, 2006; Cowley et al, 2008), the experiences players have in or with games (Gee et al, 2003; Cox *et al*, 2012; Calvillo-Gámez et al, 2015), the relationship between games and other cultural products (Squire, 2002; King & Krzywinska, 2002; Scolari, 2009), and potential effects videogames could have on their players (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Greitemeyer & Osswald, 2010; Anderson & Gentile, 2012). Yet we rarely pay attention to how players obtain their hardware and software – even when we talk about the industry, we mostly focus on the way games are manufactured (Tschang, 2007; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009) and marketed (Carlson & Corliss, 2011; Chess, 2011), rather than the actual social and financial processes by which players acquire the games they wish to play. This suggests that there is an unspoken assumption that videogames and the required hardware are readily available for *everyone*, or at least for every player. What one plays is then merely a subjective, individual, consumer choice. As such, the activity of videogame purchase – or acquisition in general, as not all videogames are bought – is not often discussed (in-depth) in academia.

Videogame purchases is a topic worthwhile discussing in the context of this study because it speaks directly to the core research question through the concept of play and motivation. As discussed in **CHAPTER 1**, this study conceptualises play as a player's engagement with videogames in a general sense, and purchasing/acquiring videogames is certainly a critical and fundamental aspect of a player's engagement with the videogame medium. Furthermore, the notion of motivation in this study refers to the reasons for play articulated by players. As such, asking participants how and why they purchased/acquired their games in certain ways contributes to a more comprehensive view on the participants' understanding of both themes.

In this chapter I discuss the players' remarks about their videogame purchases and acquisitions. While the ways through which videogames are purchased/acquired appears to be relatively unsophisticated, the motivations for doing so seem to be far more elusive. The Marxist notion of value is employed to further delineate the motivations mentioned by the partic-

ipants. Using the concepts of culture-value and gaming-value, I distinguish between the values articulated about elements external and internal to the physical artefact of the game itself and its use by players. Comparing and contrasting remarks of Western and Chinese participants, I will examine the connections between the remarks and their respective socio-cultural and economic contexts. Lastly, this chapter also points out the curious lack of mentions regarding gaming-value. This indicates that use-value as a theoretical concept needs to be updated to reflect the nuanced, multi-faceted nature of contemporary commodities. I argue investigating players' use of videogames through grounded approaches could contribute to such goal. Overall, this chapter illustrates that the player-videogame relationship is also maintained – it is developed outside gaming activities in socio-cultural and economic contexts, and therefore should be understood as such. Before moving on to discuss interview data, I want to first briefly address the implications behind taking videogame purchase/acquisition for granted.

Before Gaming

As mentioned above, videogame purchase/acquisition has rarely been discussed socio-culturally in academia, despite being one of the core activities the entire industry is based around. One could argue that this is not surprising: it is merely a result of the broader political atmospheres of academia and that of the videogame industry. Generally speaking, this is a form of socio-economic blindness and indeed, for most people writing about videogames in the West, scholars and journalists alike, videogames and related hardware are probably easily afforded.

Meanwhile, the disciplinary lineage of Game Studies encourages textual analyses or studies of the effects of gaming, as discussed by Mäyrä (2008), Thornham (2010) and Shaw (2010). Furthermore, as Chess and Shaw (2015) have observed, contemporary Game Studies is underscored by the urge towards legitimising gaming and videogames as an entire art form or social practice – and therefore subsequently validating the intellectual works built around them. To argue that the medium's contents are deeply meaningful seems naturally the most effective approach for such a mission of scholarly legitimacy. As such, the foci of Game Studies are mostly on the inherent artistic value of these media texts or the actual (meaningful) use of such texts; whereas discussing the players' efforts in acquiring games and required products would not contribute greatly to these particular discussions. Videogame purchase/acquisition possesses a certain pragmatism and surface-level ordinariness, which Game Studies scholars, in tacit pursuit of the established intellectual ground of cinema or literature studies, tend not to consider.

However, it should be clear why videogame purchases *should* be seen as an important aspect of the player-videogame relation: to play a game, a player must firstly gain access to it. In the Western context, paying for videogames is the norm – it is the overwhelmingly dominant means by which players acquire and subsequently consume games media. The centrality of full-price purchases discussed by participants primarily concerned what are known as 'triple-A' or 'AAA' games (namely the mass-produced, large-scale games that tend to be the centre of media attention), which typically cost at least £40 per copy. This is certainly not a price tag that could be described as 'cheap' for all players, particularly participants of this study: university or college students, who are often understood as being the core demographic of players. There is therefore a tension we need to unpick between the normalisation of full-price purchases in the Western context and the high prices of games.

Meanwhile, Western participants indicated that their main method of purchasing videogames is, understandably, waiting for discounts or through the after-market. However, they also suggested that the low-priced purchases were usually done in large volume or at much higher frequency, resulting in personal collections of games that were never or rarely played. This practice presents another tension worth unpicking: normalising 'excessive' purchasing despite limited leisure time.

Furthermore, paying for games is a practice that cannot be taken for granted within gaming consumption if considered on a global scale. In many geographical-cultural contexts, piracy is the norm (Traphagan & Griffith, 1998; de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2005; Castells & Cardoso, 2012) and indeed we can also think of the 'triple-A' game consumption in China in relation to this. My findings suggest that piracy remains the primary method of acquiring videogames for my Chinese participants. However, this does not mean videogame purchases (and spending money on videogames in general) is meaningless for this demographic. In fact, almost all Chinese participants could recall several instances of purchasing videogames. Actually, the Chinese participants' remarks on their methods of acquiring videogames strongly paralleled their Western peers' accounts of videogame purchases.

Simply put, videogame purchase/acquisition is a complicated, nuanced player activity, rooted in socio-cultural contexts that are inherently unequal. It is as personal as it is consumerist; it is as grounded in reality as it is driven by wants and needs. Therefore, videogame purchase/acquisition should be investigated empirically but not be assumed with a blanket approach that only sees it as reflection of pleasure and desire. I will illustrate this argument throughout this chapter by examining it from the participants' perspective.

Two Methods of Videogame Purchases in Western Gaming Culture

Let us first take a closer look at two particular types of videogame purchase that, according to the Western participants, are both common in Western gaming culture. The first of which is the 'pre-order'. As the term suggests, a pre-order is placing an order before a videogame is actually released. In terms of the 'cost-efficiency' logics, pre-ordering seems an 'irrational' act, owing to guarantee that the price will almost always descend as time elapses after its initial release. Like any media products, the prices of videogames are made fluid by the industry and associated retailers and respond to changing markets and the declining value of an individual product. Typically, a videogame costs the full price from the moment its pre-order is open until several months after its actual release, and the price will then gradually become lower as time proceeds. Purchasing it at full price is therefore, strictly in terms of cost-efficiency, a decision that is 'illogical' to a later acquisition of that same product.

Avoiding pre-orders in videogame purchase is not only limited to saving money. Thanks to digital nature of the medium, most videogames only *improve* over time, since developers usually provide post-release downloads with additional content or fixes of glitches ('patches'). Therefore, the most cost efficient course of action for a player is to simply wait several months for the price to drop – not to mention that by then the game would very likely have already found its way into the second-hand market or the numerous sales provided by digital distribution platforms. At this point a game could be acquired *more cheaply*, and in many cases with *more to actually do* within the game-world.

However, the expensive method of purchase that is pre-order is ubiquitous. Every Western participant told me that they had pre-ordered videogames more than once – even though they were *fully aware* that pre-ordering was not the most cost-efficient method of purchasing videogames. In fact, as we will see below, they considered pre-orders to be carefully made choices. This sophisticated attitude towards videogame pre-orders could be best illustrated in the following remark from Ms SShelb:

> Depends on what it is. **BORDERLAND [HANDSOME COLLECTION]**, I waited for it. I know I want it, but I have enough stuff to play, and it is 50 quid when it came out. But [through a price matching scheme provided by the retailor] it went down to [£] 34.99,

> so I bought it. […] I bought **STATE OF DECAY** on day one, and I probably buy **UNCHARTED** on day one[9], and I probably will buy **TOMB RAIDER** on day one, because I know those games are worth it. I bought **FINAL FANTASY ZERO** on day one, with the steel box and everything, because I am a big **FINAL FANTASY** nerd. So that is some examples that I bought on day-one, cos that is something I know I will spend over 100 hours on it. […] Cos a lot of games nowadays goes the way that they are full of bugs, they are broken, they 'forgot' [quotation mark gesture] to put some features in, and they stick a 50 quid price on it. It just makes me really angry. I just go: no, you are not getting my money. […] But any **FINAL FANTASY** game, I will just forget all about that.

Meanwhile, pre-ordering is not the only method through which Western players purchase videogames: the Western participants also stated that the majority of their videogame collection was purchased when the games were on *sale* or could be purchased at a *discount*. Yet such seemingly cost-efficient purchases are not necessarily more economically 'rational' than pre-orders. This is because the participants also noted that they also own collections of videogames that they have purchased yet never had time to play; and the participants also indicated that such collections kept on growing. Hence although those purchases are more cost-efficient than pre-orders in individual terms, they could still be considered 'irrational' within a broader context of players' self-reflection on their own leisure practices – *and once again, the players knew it*, as iterated by Mr ALink:

> I should do more PC gaming because of the Steam sales. I would never have the time to play all those games, but the list is just keep on piling up. Why I keep on buying them – it is on sale! It is not a good reason, you need to play them. The thing with PC gaming is, there is just so many things – first it was Steam, and I buy stuff off Good Old Games, which is great, and then there is Humble Bundle, and then 365 Gaming, there are all those online shops to put out games, you buy from one, you just forgot from which one you bought it. You know there is a game out there you bought, you want to download it, but you can't remember from which site you bought it from, so complicated, you don't get that with console, only with PC games[10].

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[9] Day one: the day of release, 'purchase on day one' is *de facto* a pre-order, since the price of the games are unlikely to drop on the release day, and the players could not know about the actual quality of the videogame.

[10] Steam, Good Old Games, Humble Bundle, and 365 Gaming are all digital videogame distributors that operate exclusively online.

Both remarks from the Western Participants clearly indicate that videogame purchase is a far from unproblematic expression of want or pleasure; it is a deeply personal process, which involves constant conflict between a player's own desire and the assumptions provided by the Western socio-cultural context of gaming.

In order to better examine the participants' remarks on their videogame purchases and to better understand the seemingly conflicting participants' accounts of both purchase methods, this chapter employs the Marxist concepts of 'values'.

Exchange-value, Use-value and the Money-Form

This thesis utilises the concepts of *exchange-value* and *use-value*, popularised by Marx (1999, Chapter 1). At the most obvious level, videogames, like any commodity circulated on the market, have monetary values prescribed to them; such values typically manifest themselves through the price tags attached to them – this is the 'exchange-value'[11]. Use-value, on the other hand, refers to the value gained through the actual usage of an item (Marx, 1999, Chapter 1; Hills, 2002, p. 33). It is worth noting that despite the translation 'use-value'[12], it does not just refer to the barebones functionality of the item – gaming in the case of a videogame – but the cultural and societal meanings embedded in a person's engagement with said item: use-value is the human needs an item fulfils (Marx, 1999, Chapter 1). Lastly, what we might understand as the 'conversion rate' between exchange-value and use-value is 'money form' (Marx, 1999, Chapter 1), which is to say how appropriate the price tag of a product is to the kind of use value one can get from it.

Referring back to the remark by Ms SShelb above, for instance, in the case of **BORDERLAND: HANDSOME COLLECTION** she withheld the purchase because she already had enough games to play. This suggests that her justification for the eventual purchase was a price-drop but not function related (for example, running out of games to play). Thus it appears that the anticipated guaranteed ownership of it ('I know I want it') is part of the use-value for her.

Similarly, in the case of the **FINAL FANTASY** franchise, the activity of purchasing itself is part of the reason that makes the retail price acceptable. Despite a clear awareness of the risk of pre-ordering, her comments demonstrate a strong commitment to this particular series of

[11] It is acknowledged that in Marx's original writing (Capital, Chapter 1, published by Oxford University Press, 1999), exchange-value is not exactly the same as price. However, these distinctions are not analytically relevant to the present discussion.

[12] *Gebrauchswert*: this word consists of two parts, *Gebrauch* [1. use; 2. customs, manner, praxis] + *wert* [value].

games irrespective of the price models at play or what new game has been released in the franchise, and these concerns of 'fan obligation' appear to supersede the capitalist 'rational' monetary concerns.

Thus we can further consider use-value in relation to the videogame in terms of two more specific categories: gaming-value and culture-value[13]. By gaming-value I am referring to the values that come from players' direct interactions with game worlds, namely gaming *itself*; whereas culture-value concerns the values players acknowledged that reside within interactions with or through videogames beyond the actual, immediate, embodied, physical act of gaming. Again take Ms SShelb's remark as an example: she rationalised some of her potential day one purchases with 'I know I will spend over 100 hours on it', which refers to the volume of entertainment she foresaw that she would obtain through gaming, namely gaming-value; whereas the other rationales discussed above draw more on her engagement with videogames as media products (namely culture-value) with regards to particular franchises and what they meant to her individually and personally, not commercially or financially.

However, the purpose is not to create a rigid dichotomy; there are also cases where the two use-values intersect. For example, Mr JStanley, a male British participant, mentioned that he would occasionally purchase games just because his friends (whom he met online) were playing it so that he could game with them, 'even not getting it for myself'. It is the combination of gaming-value – gaming with his friends in these cases – and culture-value – the sense of belonging facilitated through gaming with others – that enticed him to make these purchases. Proposing these two categories is an effort to adopt the players' perspective in keeping with a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz & Smith, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 2009) to understanding videogame purchase practices, as they are informed by the participants' articulations of their meaning-making for purchase, rather than the researcher performing an analysis with pre-formed notions about the categories into which respondents' comments would fit. These two definitions are designed to unpick the personal and industrial values present in the participants' remarks, and in turn to point specifically towards the particular kinds of value players perceive in an interactive medium, how such meaning-making processes intersect with cultures and communities of gamers and game-playing, and the importance of understanding the ideological and political-cultural, as well as the leisure-time

[13] Use of the term *culture* is intentional for the purpose of differentiating between other occasions where *cultural* value is discussed.

and playful, values of videogames. I return to these definitions throughout this chapter, starting first with a deeper analysis of the pre-ordering phenomenon through the lenses of gaming-value and culture-value.

Pre-ordering

Pre-ordering, when understood in detail with regards to the consumer practices it defines and heralds, is perhaps one of the most striking manifestations of consumer capitalism. Aside from what has been discussed above in relation to waiting for a price drop, it also means a player is paying for something they do not yet know about in any substantial detail. Yet many participants appeared to have been convinced that they knew exactly which games were 'broken' and should be avoided, as well as which would provide good gaming-value, and therefore appeared unconcerned about this inherent 'risk' of the pre-order. In addition to Ms SShelb, there were other strong examples of Western participants' rationalisation of pre-ordering/buying videogames without knowing what they really were:

> Mr JDante: A lot of the times I pre-order games just because I want them. But a lot of times they also come with pre-order bonuses, or in limited quantity. Like, I pre-ordered the **TALES OF XILLIA 2**, the limited edition; that was like 80 quid, that is a lot of money. But it's now nowhere to been seen. I want to make sure I get this version of it.

> Mr AKBoo: I got Wii U when it first came out, I didn't really use it until **MARIO KART 8** came out. And then the 3DS [games], **POKÉMON** is my big favourite, whenever a new **POKÉMON** [game] comes out, I literally buy it on the night of its release.

Mr JDante's comment points towards a common strategy adopted by videogame publishers to introduce extra use-value without fundamentally or substantially altering (or re-engineering) the games: rewarding pre-order purchasers with digital and/or physical incentives, which either provide (very little) extra gaming-value or, more often than not, possess culture-value of their own due to the imposition of arbitrary virtual scarcity – which is to say, not all players have access to them, and those who do thereby have access to something 'special'. Although Western players do not ignore such pre-order 'benefits', greater emphasis was placed on the ownership of the videogame itself ('just because I want them'), and sometimes even on the very activity of purchase itself, as the example of the midnight releases mentioned by Mr AKBoo.

In other words, curiously the culture-value in such activities is often articulated in disjunction with gaming-value itself, and primarily aligned to the possession of the game item and the method by which it was acquired. This particular method of generating culture-value is very similar to what is more often known as a ritual of consumption/possession. As McCracken (1986) observes, when 'the individual successfully deploys possession ritual and manages to extract the meaningful properties that have been invested in the consumer goods' (p. 79), in our case the culture-value assigned and encouraged by the industry, they will be 'able to use goods as markers of time, space and occasions' (p.79). The games and/or the incentives are more than what they physically (or digitally) are; they are monuments of those purchases. Substantial culture-value is accrued from both the acquisition of the pre-order copy and the act of purchasing, and acquiring, such a copy.

In the above remarks, pre-ordering a game or paying full-price is depicted as paying the extra exchange-value simply for the temporally advanced ownership of the game (sometimes with a dash of ethical consumerism through the desire to support a particular studio or developer). The ownership is transformed into a possession ritual (McCracken, 1986), yet the object of such ownership bears no particular idiosyncrasy that in any way differentiates itself from later items. What this practice and its cultural associations eventually entails, however, is a case of dualism: the participants articulate the culture-value of a videogame that a player is paying for as standing alongside the object itself but separate, instead of something that stems directly from the game itself.

We can therefore start to understand why those incentives seem almost meaningless from the perspective of gaming-value (or even use-value of themselves), and why they are often offered as justifications for their economically misjudged purchases in distinctive ways. This is because, as mentioned above, the digital nature of videogames allows them to provide exactly the same gaming-value regardless of the point of purchase (aside from unique digital content) – in most cases the game itself is unchanged regardless of when it is purchased, and in many cases a game purchased later might have *more* content not present in the original release.

Therefore, elements such as the 'limited quantity' highlighted by Mr JDante, or the 'midnight release' mentioned by Mr AKBoo, are prompts for the transcendence of exchange-value into culture-value. This is because money remains the most valuable and meaningful aspect of the entire affair. The *exchange-value* is not only an indication of the culture-value of the games being pre-ordered, but an integral part of it. The very act of specifically electing to pay

a higher exchange-value is assigned its own culture-value, which exists independently from the gaming-value. Adorno (1951/2005) would perhaps see this as indicative of the kind of direction in which the 'commodity world' is leading us, or in his words: 'disenchantment with the contemplated world is the sensorium's reaction to its objective role as a 'commodity world'' (p. 227). The act of paying a seemingly 'unnecessarily' high price brings with it the tacit statement of fan devotion to a certain franchise, and in turn an overall meta-level dedication to the act of computer gaming per se. In such a scenario the pre-order has taken on numerous kinds of culture-value, and has transcended (or at least become as important as) gaming-value in the decision-making processes of games consumers. Not to mention that, more often than not, no incentives are offered at all with pre-orders, so there are no unique, distinctive or digital accoutrements that mark the purchase out from an equivalent purchase a week later.

Too Many Games, Too Little Time

This particular capital consumerist logic also bleeds into more common and seemingly more 'rational' purchases. The next part of this discussion turns its attention to the purchase method that is the opposite of pre-ordering: buying games when they are on discount/sale, through second-hand stores, or purchasing them through friends/acquaintances who all contribute to the re-circulation of games media. Many participants indicated that purchasing discounted games was their primary means of obtaining videogames, as they did so far more often than pre-ordering videogames.

While buying games on discount/sale seems to be a 'cost-efficient' choice, it begins to appear significantly less so when inspected within a broader context. First and foremost, an overwhelming volume of games are released every year. For instance, according to Gameinformer.com[14], 365 titles were scheduled to be released on PlayStation 4 in 2015 alone; indeed not all titles were brand-new games (some were re-releases of older titles), but it was still far more than any single player could possibly handle. In other words, even if one behaved 'economically self-interested' in each individual purchase, which is to say only buying games when the prices were reduced, there would still be a significant gap between the time those games demanded, and the time a player had to play them. Ms SSylvanas, a female British participant, showed just how big the gap between her time and the games could be:

[14] http://www.gameinformer.com/b/news/archive/2015/07/27/2015-video-game-release-schedule.aspx, last accessed: 04/11/2016.

> Stuff like PC, you got Steam sales, which I always spend a hundred pounds on at least, which gets you about a thousand games. There are games I got on there I have never touched. […] I got **FAR CRY** and **FAR CRY** sequels. I got it from last Winter Sale, and I have never touched it. I got hundreds of games like that, I have never touched, some of them are really good games. So much stuff and so many games, those are all really good, and those are all so cheap.

Therefore, taking a step back and viewing her approach to videogame (purchases) in its entirety, it appears as economically illogical as partaking in pre-orders, if not more so: pre-orders only occur, as stated by participants, when they hold ample interest in the games and sufficient evidence to indicate a high gaming-value, and are therefore likely committed to actually *playing the game* they have bought; as there is also no indication that the pre-ordered games are not played extensively as part of the rationalisation of their purchases. Thus their discourses at the very least still somewhat, although mostly implicitly, revolve around the gaming. Yet purchasing a game without playing it practically expels gaming-value from the 'money-form', leaving behind only the act of exchange and whatever culture-values and preferences have become associated with it.

Gaming-value is nevertheless involved in the decision-making process, playing a crucial role in legitimising the purchases; or in Ms SSylvanas' words, 'those are all really good [games]' (2015). Yet without gaming, gaming-value is never actually *realised* in practice. Moreover, she, like other participants, is fully aware of the high likelihood that she would not have enough required time to fully realise its gaming-value – 'I got hundreds of games like that'. This type of purchase is rather common among participants[15]. Without gaming-value being realised, a player needs to identify – or rather the industry needs to create – a certain culture-value in order to restore or justify the exchange. Ms SSylvanas' account suggests it is found through a similar two-layered abstraction of culture-value as in the case of pre-order discussed above – the ritualised possession provides one layer of culture-value, upon which the exchange-value also bears its own culture-value. Curiously, in addition to ritualised possession, it seems that the culture-value also roots itself in the relatively low exchange-value – in other words, the low exchange-value symbolises the success in behaving like a smart con-

[15] A footnote to the ubiquity of such over-consumption is that some participants (all female) told me that they rarely saw the need of purchasing any videogames themselves, as they just borrow from their partners' collections.

sumer, as Ms SSylvanas stressed: 'and those are all so cheap'. We can therefore see a complex set of values at play in the purchasing of videogames that might never actually be played, and this forms an interesting relationship with the pre-order. On the one hand they represent two ends of a spectrum – the rare purchase of extremely expensive games that will be played for dozens and potentially hundreds of hours, and the common purchase of cheap games that might never be played at all; yet, on the other hand, they both share a commonality regarding the importance of culture-value inserting itself between the player and the gaming-value, and into their meaning-making of videogame purchases.

The Big Picture

This predicament has not only been experienced by Ms SSylvanas. Other Western participants who regularly purchase videogames suggested that they often find themselves in similar situations: too many games, not enough time. Yet almost none of the Western participants indicated that they would consider stopping buying videogames – if anything, they would like to buy more. Mr RMentat, a British male participant who had not been purchasing games for a long period of time (at the time of interview), told me that he 'probably should' buy some games, right after stating that he decided to stay away from new releases because he knew 'the danger of [games] taking too much time from [him]'. This is also clearly iterated by participants with higher disposable incomes, such as Mr ALink, who at the time of interview was in stable middle-class employment. Just to quote him one more time:

> I would never have the time to play all those games, but the list is just keep on piling up. Why I keep on buying them – it is on sale! It is not a good reason, you need to play them. The thing with PC gaming is, there is just so many things – first it was Steam, and I buy stuff off Good Old Games, which is great, and then there is Humble Bundle, and then 365Gaming, there are all those online shops to up out games, you buy from one, you just forgot from which one you bought it.

Similar discourses of ownership, although this time more for its own sake rather than from the apparent pressure of an excess of market choices, can be observed from Mr DSonic, who was also in stable middle-class employment at the time of interview:

> I am married and work full time, stuff like that. Unless I really, really liked it, I will not even play those games – I will keep them in my collection. I just like to have it, in case I want to go back to it. I just sorted out my PS3 games the other day, because I got cases and cases of DVDs and games, and all my PS3 games are dotted around these shelves. And when I got all those together – and bear in mind that I actually traded

> in lots of the games – I have like 45 games, and probably there is not even a point to trade them in now, because I will get probably one pound for each for these. I was just like, "maybe I will play them sometime".

This awkward consumption pattern of accumulating games without actually playing them is symptomatic of a much more wide-spread problem introduced by consumerism and its more current form, consumer capitalism. The predicament, in Lewis' (2013) words, between 'the growth of commodities and stagnation of leisure time' (p. 39), is what he regards as a defining characteristic and an inevitability of modern consumer capitalism, an ideology that is fundamental to our 'modern economic, social and cultural life' (p. 15). This ideology builds its entire philosophy on the idea that ever-expanding production (and subsequently consumption) is the key to prosperity (Lewis, 2013). This predicament is also what Campbell (1987) regards as 'the mystery of modern consumerism': 'an apparently endless pursuit of wants' (p. 37).

Bourdieu's (1984/2010, p. 284) theorisation of cultural capital[16] and economic capital allows for a broader, more macro-oriented perspective that accounts for the wider socio-economic context. He demonstrates that actors with possession of economic capital, in this case the games industry, hold the power to shape the cultural capital, in this case by injecting additional meanings into a certain methods of purchase (Bourdieu, 1984/2010, p. 299), which results in the games industry accruing greater profit through higher exchange-value per exchange (sale), or simply more sales. Simply put, the economic capital holder – the industry – needs to further consumer capitalism. As Campbell (1987) puts it, consumerism is characterised by the desire of encouraging the consumer's consumption of 'superfluous item[s]' (p. 59), whereas Lewis (2013) refers to 'favour[ing] quantity over quality' (p. 153). Either way, we readily appraise the presence of pre-orders and sales within the video game industry, and how effectively they have achieved both goals of additional purchase and an emphasis upon the quantity of (re)distributed goods.

To achieve this, much like any industry thriving through consumer capitalism (Lewis, 2013, p. 63), the videogame industry spends a significant portion of its budget on producing more advertisements, both in terms of more conventional advertisements (Zackariasson & Wilson,

[16] One should note that here the cultural capital (of engaging with videogames in various ways) is not precisely the same capital as Bourdieu theorised. As he points out, just as cultural capital can only operate as a meaningful resource in a given context, so it is with the cultural capital of purchase videogames; it is a more circumstantiated variation on the original concept. The circumstance in this discussion is gaming culture, as the interviews are presented as a conversation between 'one player and another'.

2012) and commercialised videogame journalism (Consalvo, 2007). Looking further into this practice, it is no secret that increasing volumes of capital and labour resources are being invested in sponsoring new forms of supposedly player-generated content, such as YouTube videos or fan-sites – effectively blurring the boundary between advertisement and player-generated content – in an effort to adapt themselves to new methods of communication, creative production and community formation, thus securing greater influence over the construction of cultural capital in gaming culture. In this way the celebrated convergence (Jenkins, 2004; Jenkins, 2006; Staiger & Hake, 2009) has quickly became another tool for the industry to seize further control over the cultural capital. As far as this study was able to reveal, such methods continue to function well.

As a reflection of the industry's efforts, (Western) participants also indicated a noticeable level of reliance on videogame *news* – either official, journalistic or fan-made – for information despite their distrust of these same media outlets. They also stated that they often consume other videogame-related content, especially YouTube videos, either as compensation for conventional videogame media or purely as a form of entertainment. In fact, although they indicated a high awareness of the commercial nature of such content, participants still preferred such information rather than turning to their peers for information about potential purchases: they would rather 'see the gameplay video' themselves to determine whether the games would be worthwhile. The reasoning behind such choices is complicated, but it allows the industry to have more chances of performing their monologue uninterrupted, propagating their definition of the culture-value of a particular videogame, and more importantly realising such culture-value and in the process acquiring cultural capital. One way or another, this leads to ever more consumption.

Fundamentally, a (Western) player is constantly being told that the activities of pre-ordering games or building a sizable collection of videogames means more than just gaining accesses to the games that they like, or even a display of wealth. Instead, both are also symbolic of dedication and prestige as a player, as they are symbolic of the gaming-related cultural capital that they possess. Equally, the two also function together and reinforce one another: when games are presented as being items with enough status and gaming-value to merit consideration of a pre-order, the purchase of those games – when later available through sales and discounted at such a low price – seems *too good to be true*, and further encourages purchases.

In short, the analysis above shows the relationships between the ideological assumptions of the games industry, the social contexts of play and interpersonal play, and players' accounts of their game-playing and game-purchasing lives. The games industry, in releasing pre-orders and also in (generally) accepting or supporting the existence of sales and discounts, has been able to both tap into, and in part create, the conditions for the profitability of these practices. In turn, videogame purchase as an activity is not simply an unsophisticated reflection of a player's desire for certain pleasure (was it ever?), but is deeply entrenched in the ideology of modern capitalism, politically and culturally charged with social implications by the industry – and it is perceived by Western participants as such. The correlations discussed above only become more evident when we examine the Chinese participants' remarks on their video-game acquisition methods.

The Bigger Picture: The Chinese Perspective

Roughly a fifth of the Chinese participants told me that they have bought a copy of **GRAND THEFT AUTO 5** (**GTA5**). Of course this does not mean that 20% of all Chinese players (beyond this study) have bought a copy of **GTA5**, but it does reflect the conflicting relationships with piracy that some of the Chinese participants are experiencing: while piracy is largely normalised among players in Mainland China, it is not legitimised amongst the Chinese participants of this study – highly educated young adults who are mostly from middle- or upper-class families[17] and study media in the UK. All Chinese participants from Mainland China showed strong awareness towards the concept of piracy and indicated a willingness of paying for genuine copies of videogames. In fact, every Chinese participant mentioned at least one case of purchasing in this way. This remark from Ms JJiang, a Chinese female participant, captures their complex relationship with piracy very well:

> I have to admit, I also play pirated games. […] When I was a student, I did not have much surplus money to spend on games for the purpose of entertainment – but this is just an excuse, really. But as I was about to start to work, I started to know that I should buy genuine copies [of games]. Since then, I buy genuine copies of games as long as I can, just to show my support – not really about showing support… But even since I started doing so, I feel uncomfortable whenever I see a pirated game, even though I still have two pirated games stored on my computer.

[17] The tuition fee for a Chinese student on a 12 month MA programme at University of Leeds was £16,000 in 2015.

While seeing piracy as normal, she also indicated that gaming with pirated games was not to be justified, at least not through the 'student has no income' argument, in other words, the 'money-form' as a concept should be justified. More interestingly, after swiftly revoking the justification that buying genuine copies is her way of showing support (to the developers), she suggested that owning genuine copies symbolises something of other significance as well – significant enough to create a mentality whereby a mere sighting of a pirated game could introduce a sense of unease.

This remark reveals that she experienced a tension that parallels what Western participants experienced with pre-orders. This tension is rooted in the disparity between available monetary resources and prices of videogames – the most commonly mentioned (not necessarily used) justification for using pirated games among Chinese participants[18]. Meanwhile, it is also related to the broader discourse of de-normalising piracy whilst legitimising commodification of copyright through moral terms. Although it is not a discourse natively created in Mainland China, with the endorsement from both the industry and the government, it nevertheless gained sizable popularity among Chinese players, including the participants of this study.

Such discourses could probably be best described as 'pseudo ethical consumption'. 'Pseudo' because this discourse is unlikely generated by consumers, who are normally considered to be the initiators of 'ethical consumption' (see: Lewis & Potter, 2011). The discourse aims to justify the 'money-form', which is a result of commercialisation by capitalism (Adorno, 1951/2005, pp. 217-218). Therefore, I argue that the Chinese gaming culture is yet to embrace consumer capitalism fully: in Chinese gaming culture, the foundation of consumerism – the 'money-form' – is yet to be fully established, so the term consumption seems to be more appropriate (2011, p. 29). Indeed, the Chinese gaming culture is moving rapidly in that direction, but it has yet to reach the point where British (or Western) gaming culture is at present: the videogame industry in the West is less concerned with piracy, but has worked rigorously to promote ever more consumption, as well as to delegitimise the second-hand market.

In China, the focal point of the industry is on legitimising the 'money-form', whereby videogames should be paid for because of the very fact that they have use-value[19]; whereas in the

[18] 9 of the 19 Chinese participants from Mainland China talked about piracy during their interviews; all 9 mentioned this as a justification for using pirated games with different levels of scepticism.
[19] An industry-wide anti-videogame-piracy-alliance was established on 25/11/2016 with the backing of a government body (http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2016-11/25/nw.D110000renmrb_20161125_3-12.htm, last accessed: 11/07/2017).

West such efforts focus more on normalising higher exchange-values by arguing that engagements with videogames host more use-value, usually through adhering to extra culture-value. Still, purchasing a videogame instead of pirating it could be seen as a parallel to pre-orders: essentially it is giving up more exchange-value for slightly less, if not identical, gaming-values. As such, in both cases the propaganda assumes a moral/ethical disguise, seeking to reinvent consumptions into rituals, by assigning meanings to the very act of purchase itself.

Chinese participants therefore also associated exchange-value with culture-value (as shown in Mr JJiang's comment). Among the participants referenced above, Mr XHChi stated that he would normally purchase 'collectors' editions' (which are more expensive, as expected) instead of plain copies for 'collection purposes'; Ms JJiang, besides her account above that clearly suggests she sees certain culture-value in purchases, told me that she once bought the newest instalment of a long-running videogame franchise party due to nostalgia, although 'the game is so bad' that she never played it after the initial purchase. In addition, Mr PHJi bought **GTA5** because 'it is not that expensive once I made some money with summer part-time job'; whereas Mr ZZen suggested his rationale for purchasing a copy of **GTA5** was: 'if you really liked the game, spending the same amount money as you would on a [restaurant] meal or a couple pieces of clothes was worthwhile', and this is in addition to the added gaming-value [such as follow-up Downloadable Content (DLC) and online-support, the majority of which could not be obtained through piracy].

These accounts clearly indicate the presence of elements that could be associated with consumer capitalism, or at least with consumerism. Mr XHChi and Ms JJiang's statements on both occasions resemble their Western peers' accounts on pre-orders or 'excessive' purchases respectively. Mr ZZen's presented the purchase of a genuine copy of a game as a symbol of 'true' appreciation, which is similar to the ritualised possession discussed above. Mr PHJi's statement corresponds to what Lewis' (2013) asserts as the consumer capitalist approach to earning and spending: 'a culture that constantly stresses the need to maximise our spending power' (p. 87). It could be argued that, despite the different foci, the logic and ideology reflected in the Chinese participants' remarks on videogame purchases (instead of piracy) evidently parallel those reflected in their Western peers' comments about pre-orders; the differences between the two stemmed from the different socio-economic contexts and the broader discourses about the two specific activities.

Too Many Games, Too Little Time: Chinese Edition

A parallel tension between finite time and the abundance of goods could be found in Chinese participants' remarks, albeit in a different frame. For example, Ms SLiang, a Chinese female participant, stated as such when being asked about the advantages and disadvantages of mobile gaming, the primary type of gaming she was engaging with at the time of interview:

> One of the disadvantages is that it takes [too much] storage space [on the device]. […] It is good that it makes use of your segmented time for gaming. But it is also bad [because] whenever you had some time, you would like to play videogames.

This type of expression is not just shared by other mobile game players, but also by more dedicated mainstream game players. Mr XHChi, a Chinese male participant and part-time videogame journalist, writing reviews for a major Chinese computer/gaming magazine, told me:

> [I do] not consider [myself] as a [computer gaming] enthusiast, because I do not have such a great interests in videogames. I consider watching films, reading books or working out in a gym as equally viable methods for leisure. [Playing] Videogames is just one of the ways to relax, or a way to socialise.

Chinese participants also experienced the problem brought about by the excessive proliferation of entertainment goods/choices – ever more consumption still seems to be presented as the 'solution'. However, neither the casual player participants nor the more dedicated player participants regarded the abundance of the medium as the root of the problem that they were confronted with. It certainly does not mean they had fewer games available for playing – if anything, the ubiquity of piracy allows Chinese players better ('free') access to videogames as it does not require any additional exchange-value other than the cost of gaming platforms. Yet, it seems they were not as compelled as their Western peers to build a collection or partake in pre-orders – in fact neither pre-order nor sale-purchases were mentioned by any of the Chinese participants.

Calling back to the discussion above, if exchange-value indeed bore its own culture-value in the context of videogame purchases, then the 'free' access (free of exchange-value) provided by piracy actually renders the acquisition of these games much less meaningful. In other words, having a sizable collection of videogames in the Chinese gaming culture does not symbolise as much cultural capital as it does in the Western context – since everyone has (almost) identical accessibility to (almost) all videogames. Therefore the Chinese participants would

see less culture-value in gaining immediate ownership of videogames; and with fewer games in their direct and personal possessions (whose gaming-values remain unrealised because of not being played), 'too many games to play' became a less visible issue than 'too many activities demanding my leisure time'. It is not to imply Chinese players spend less time on gaming than their Western peers (although the interview data suggests as much), however considering the participants were at the time just starting their postgraduate courses in a foreign country, their accounts are not necessarily indicative of their previous gaming patterns. Not to mention that gaming seemed to be less legitimised in China, when comparing Chinese participants' remarks on gaming as an activity to those made by their Western peers.

This particular observation echoes with the previously argued difference between the foci of the industry-produced media content about videogames, and more importantly the contemporary state of consumer capitalism in the Chinese (in comparison to Western) gaming culture: as the 'money-form' of videogame purchases is not as established in Chinese gaming culture as in Western gaming culture, the industry and its companion media content places more emphasis on legitimising the spending of money on videogames. On the other hand, corresponding to the overall higher level of consumer capitalism in Western gaming culture, the Western industry and its companion texts take a step further than their Chinese counterparts, focusing on emphasising the culture-value of videogame purchases and shaping exchange-value into a component of use-value. Nevertheless, in both cases, the economical capital holders are actively investing their resources into shaping cultural capital in ways that could contribute to their future dominance over economical capital, as Bourdieu (1984/2010) predicts, and greater profit, as Lewis (2013) asserts. Essentially, the means through which Chinese players acquire videogames are just as socio-culturally meaningful as their parallels in the West, regardless of whether the 'money form' is involved. Equally, videogame acquisition is just as meaningful to Chinese participants as videogame purchase is to their Western peers.

The Full Picture

Arguing that the industry plays a critical role in how players articulate their motivations for videogame purchases/acquisition is not intended to revive the 'hypodermic needle model'. It should be noted that all the industry could do is to assign specific meanings to videogame purchases/acquisition and provide phrases for players to talk about them; but this certainly does not mean players who use said phrases to discuss their purchase/acquisition choices automatically internalise the consumer capitalism-driven meaning-making proposed by the

industry. Decades of research has already come to the consensus that the possibility for media of influencing audiences in a behaviourist 'stimuli-response' pattern is a long debunked myth (Ruddock, 2007; Nightingale, 2014), especially in the context of media-related consumption (Moores, 1993, p. 117; Lewis, 2013, p. 77; Campbell, 1987, p. 46).

Rather, I consider my participants' remarks on videogame purchases and acquisitions to be a reflection of the consumer capitalist logic that is deeply embedded our cultures and societies. Campbell (1987) demonstrates that modern (Western) consumerism does not emerge suddenly in industrial societies, but is closed related to the Romantic Movement that has been taking place for more than two centuries. Adorno asserts that it is unlikely for an adult who is brought-up in capitalist society not to internalise its ideological values (1951/2005, p. 227). The tacit ideological values at play here are not new, and comparing our work here with work into gaming in other geographical-cultural contexts such as China (Cao & Downing, 2008; Liu & Li, 2011) highlights the importance of bringing to the fore these deep underpinning values that the games industry builds upon. Stepping into an even broader context, this is hardly limited to videogames; similar patterns of consumption can be found in other parallel cultural products (Currid, 2007; Force, 2009).

As Campbell warns, modern consumer activities should not be simply treated as an 'unproblematic by-product of exposure to the media, or the simulation of emulative desires'; rather, the focus should be placed on 'the rationality of product selection within a framework of taken-for-granted wants and tastes' (1987, p. 58). It is proposed that videogame pre-orders and sales exemplify this trend, and how players respond to the trend, how industries take advantage of the trend, and how players articulate their meaning-making of the videogame acquisition/purchase with regards to the commodity outputs of the industry. In the investigation into players' purchase decisions, it is important not to mistake the articulated discourses about consumption as the actual experiences of consumption. There is ample evidence in the data that urges us not to automatically translate the participants' articulated meaning-making of the purchase methods into their actual motivations for practising them. Indeed, they appear to be illogical when judged by traditional 'smart consumer logic' with regards to the minimisation of cost and the attendant desire for maximisation of consumption, but to simply dismiss them as such would miss the most important parts of the analysis presented here with regards to the nuanced, complicated, sometimes contradictorily articulated play activities and the players' meaning-making of such activity.

As noted above, most participants clearly indicated that they knew that, according to the conventional 'smart-consumer logic', the culture-values added to the pre-orders are not exactly 'worth' the extra exchange-value they had paid. If the fact that all participants indicated the vast majority of their purchases were made when the prices were reduced was not a strong enough signifier, there were also more immediate ones. For example, Mr JDante recognised £80 for a limited edition was 'a lot of money' and sometimes he pre-ordered only because he wanted the games; although Ms SSylvanas stated that she is 'a sucker for free stuff' when it comes to pre-ordering, she also displayed critical awareness that the notion of 'free' is merely a framing device that circulates within particular industrial-marketing discourses, as she performed an 'air quote' gesture whilst stating as such. Similarly, the participants demonstrated conflicting attitudes towards their ever-growing videogame collections.

Simply put, although players are indeed relying on the discourses that are underpinned by consumer-capitalist logics to discuss videogame purchase/acquisition and their motivations for doing so, such logics are not necessarily internalised by them. As Campbell (1987) observes, a consumer's own justification is not necessarily fully in-line with the 'moral' legitimisation provided by the industry; while consumerism is indeed taken for granted, a consumer is often only utilising those arguments that allow them 'to do so [excessive consumption] with a good conscience' (p. 30). In other words, the participants' remarks should be considered as reflections of the discourses that were immediately available to them to articulate their motivations and experiences of pre-orders when they were confronted by general questions such as 'how do you get your games?/do you do pre-orders?'.

Indeed, as Campbell (1987) points out, the (iterated) reasons for purchases should be considered as the 'rationality of product selection within a framework of taken-for-granted wants and tastes' (p.58), whereas the actual 'wants and tastes' are often wrapped in layers of socio-cultural, economic and ideological reasoning, as demonstrated above. Simply put, while videogame purchase/acquisition is certainly motivated by desire and pleasure, such activity is far from an unsophisticated literal indication of such desire and pleasure. Rather, it demands us to carefully unpack the 'wants and tastes' that are often taken for granted: in this study, it is the gaming-value, which supposedly forms the very foundation of both the player-videogame relationship and the 'money form' of paying for videogames, yet, it is curiously absent from the participants' remarks.

Investigating Gaming-value

One might note that the use-value articulated by Western participants as their motivations for purchasing videogames concerns almost exclusively what was earlier termed culture-value, namely the use-value that is realised through non-gaming activities: the means through which the games were purchased, the cost of games, and the 'bonus' items that are included with the pre-orders, among others. Culture-value, in turn, could be understood as the elements that encourage the purchase (and ownership) of games beyond the enjoyment (anticipated or ongoing) of playing that game. Across the participants it was clear that culture-value was integral to their rationalisations of the processes of pre-ordering and sales purchasing, and in turn that contemporary gaming culture has become structured in such a way as to give meaning to these purchases. Culture-value seems quite profoundly disconnected from the gaming-value of such items, and as such the separation of these two elements represents an opportunity to take this discussion further. By moving away from a consideration of the industrial manufacturing of games on the one hand, and away from the unproblematic assumption of game access on the other, the problematisation of culture-value draws our attention to how and why games are purchased, and how this act intersects with a range of ideological concerns.

It also seems that articulating gaming-value is also problematic for players themselves. The problem is particularly noticeable in those cases where they commented on their motivations for pre-orders: as shown above, the games being pre-ordered were often those that the players identified as fans of – not to mention that all participants considered videogames to be an entertainment medium. Thus, one would naturally expect players to emphasise their eagerness to obtain access to such games and to play them as soon as possible. It appears that no gaming-related elements were specifically highlighted or even mentioned by the participants; instead, they resorted to discourses that were either created or reinvented by the industry. Meanwhile, gaming-value was only lightly touched upon by the Chinese participants before they quickly turned to culture-value. Of course, one could argue that this relates to the dynamic, reflective nature of conversation and the particular ways in which the interviews were conducted, but I propose that this also necessitates a re-examination of the concept of use-value through an investigation of gaming-value.

Gaming-value, as discussed earlier, is understood as a specialised and distinctive form of *use-value*, tailored for understanding the 'use' of a video game. I believe this more specific re-

theorisation is required because use-value as a concept was formulated in a less commercialised and less leisure-oriented era to describe *necessity* items that have 'intrinsic' use-values, such as food or clothing. In other words, use-value of these items could be seen as (broadly) universal and stable; to apply it in a modern context may require a certain level of reconfiguration (Wilson, 2004).

This is particularly true in the case of videogames: as non-essential entertainment products, videogames are far more sophisticated in value terms: just as different people have preferences for different leisure activities, different players prefer different types of videogames within the broader leisure category of 'gaming'; a game that is one player's favourite could very well mean nothing to another. The concept of gaming-value allows us to accept that the value of games across users varies greatly, and is contingent on both individual personal histories and broader ideological and industrial marketing discourses. Far from having single use-value, the use-value of games exists in a complex interplay involving many factors, and is often superseded by the culture-value assigned to the method of acquisition, or their mode of possession. These culture-values are only present, however, in games seen as having meaningful gaming-value, even if that gaming value is never realised. In my view, this also means that it is necessary for us to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced approach (in comparison to interviews) to investigate, conceptualise and theorise gaming-value.

What this entails is a perspective on videogame players that does not presume them to be 'consumers' just because they purchase and consume the videogame medium. Indeed, consumption is an integral aspect of their relationship with videogames, but it is certainly not the only means through which they make sense of their relationship with the medium – as this thesis will continue to demonstrate. In understanding consumption in this way we not only avoid the pitfalls of characterising consumer behaviour as 'irrational and reprehensible' (Campbell, 1987, p. 58), but also further develops the application of a Marxist framework in videogame research, particularly in updating the concept of use-value.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the act of gaming is not the only meaningful engagement that players have with the videogame medium; investigating other aspects of the players could also provide worthwhile insights into the players' relationships with videogames.

The chapter specifically explored the players' motivation for four types of videogame acquisition methods from the players' perspectives: two seemingly 'illogical' ones that are often practised in Western gaming culture, and two of their counterparts practised by Chinese

players. I first explored videogame purchases/acquisition methods through Marx's and Adorno's theorisations about forms of value (specifically exchange-value and use-value). By comparing two sets of parallel videogame acquisition methods iterated by the Western and Chinese participants – 1) pre-orders (instead of waiting for price reduction) in the West and paying for videogames (instead of pirating them) in China; and 2) sale/bundle purchase in the West and (the lack of) accumulating videogame collections through piracy in China – the chapter argued that the meaningful aspects of these purchases/acquisitions is more than simply obtaining their sheer entertainment value (realised through gaming); rather, the purchases themselves are activities also imbued with cultural values (meanings) by the industry and for the players. Furthermore, Bourdieu's theorisation of capital and Lewis' theorisation of consumer capitalism provide tools to trace the ideological root of, and the flow of power beneath, the two particular types of consumption. I introduced the terms 'gaming-value' and 'culture-value' to denote two primary motivations for game purchases: the actual playing of the game itself, and the extrinsic meanings and associations related to the game, such as preferences for that particular series, game developer, designer, or studio.

The chapter showed that videogame purchase/acquisition, as one of players' core non-gaming engagements with the videogame medium, is not a simple, straightforward reflection of pleasure or wants. Rather, it is entrenched in the ideology of consumer capitalism by the videogame industry, and understood by the participants socio-culturally against their own economic and cultural backgrounds.

Finally, this chapter illustrated that, in investigating the player-videogame relationship from the players' perspective, it is crucial to expand the notion of play beyond the boundary of gaming (namely players' direct engagement with videogames). The discussion demonstrated that other ways of engaging with the videogame medium also play important roles in shaping the player-videogame relationship. Those activities are also one of the 'meaningful' aspects of the player-videogame relationship for the players. Similarly, the notion of motivation should never simply be seen as an unsophisticated articulation of wants or desire. As the discussion in this chapter showed, motivation is as personal as it is cultural, political and ideological. It is always wrapped in layers of meaning-making processes and conventions. Therefore, it necessitates a perspective that is comprehensive and nuanced; this chapter suggests that a player centric approach could be a good starting point. I will expend on this idea in **CHAPTERS 4** and **7**.

Chapter 4: Motivation

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss participants' accounts of their motivations for gaming. The discussion primarily draws on their responses to the question asked at the end of interview: 'why do you play videogames?' Participants also often mentioned specific games when answering other questions, and often talked about their motivation for playing those games while doing so. Those remarks will supplement the discussion in this chapter. This chapter consists of three sections. In the first, I discuss participants' remarks about motivation for gaming in order to contrast these with existing studies about motivations for gaming. To do that, I focus on the following three arguments: 1) motivation for gaming is rooted in players' own desires and is fulfilled by players' own actions, and facilitated but not dictated by a game's content; 2) motivations for gaming are reflected in players' everyday engagement with the videogame medium in a more general sense (namely play), but not just through their in-game actions (gaming); and 3) motivations are highly condensed accounts that address the social, emotional and political roles that players' relationships with the videogame medium plays in their everyday lives, and does not just represent what they want out of games.

In the second section, I discuss the notion of fun. Almost all participants immediately resorted to this notion when answering the question: 'why do you play videogames?' But they also noted that fun as a concept was often too nebulous to elaborate on. In a way, the vagueness of 'fun' makes it particularly worth examining. In order to do so I draw on the critical realist concept of stratification to argue that game-world, gaming activity and fun are three different strata of knowledge about motivation for gaming. Although those three strata all seek to explain motivation for gaming and are closely related to each other, the three are not interchangeable. Attempting to understand fun through game-world or gaming activities would elucidate elements of fun, but will never lead to a comprehensive understanding that addresses it ontologically. Instead, to understand why gaming is fun to players, we should seek to understand this notion as the subjective experience it is.

In the final section, I offer my critical understanding of 'fun'. Compiling all participants' remarks, it appears that they considered gaming to be fun because it is an escapist activity delivered through (highly) interactive games of make-believe that offer a sense of achievement and sometimes functions as a platform for social interaction. I argue that the fun of gaming that was described by participants could be better understood through the concept

of modern autonomous imaginative hedonism. This concept illustrates the fact that active engagement turns videogames into the most vivid games of make-believe, whereas the sense of achievement brought by the rules systems elevates videogames to most emotive day-dreams. Because of that, gaming becomes arguably the most fun escapism: interactive, modern, autonomous, imaginative, skill-based hedonist activity. Thus videogames are increasingly designed to be played in highly individualised and personalised ways. In turn, videogames serve as fun platforms for social interactions, but gaming itself does not. I conclude this section with a discussion about the observation that participants embrace the escapist nature of gaming despite the negative connotations of the concept of escapism.

Motivated Play

Why do players play games? Scholars have asked this question many times. Psychologists are arguably the group of scholars who ask this question most often and have the longest history in doing so. Generally speaking, psychological studies on motivations for gaming generally focus on two particular domains: motivations for playing Massive Multiplayer Online (MMO), which is primarily researched through surveys; and motivations for gaming in relation to learning, which is mainly investigated through a combination of surveys and lab-based experiments. I shall firstly discuss the emphasis on MMO games. Ever since **WORLD OF WARCRAFT** burst onto the scene in 2004 and revolutionised MMO games, there was an accompanying surge of scholarly investigations into MMO games and their players (Corliss, 2010, p. 6), amongst which are several psychology-based studies on players' motivations for playing MMO games (including: Lafrenière et al, 2009; Yee, 2006; Yee, 2006; Chin-Sheng Wan, 2007; Kuss et al, 2012; Fuster et al, 2014).

Aside from the inherent characteristics that made MMO games appealing to scholars, such as the massive number of players and social interactions involved, and their socio-economic impact on society (Corliss, 2010, p. 6), the particular focus on MMO games is possible because of two additional reasons that are more intrinsic to academia itself. On the one hand, the more notable early attempts in theorising player motivations were initiated by game designers and scholars who had vested professional and personal interests in multiplayer games, such as Richard Bartle's famous player model (2004), and Nick Yee's player motivation model (2007). On the other hand, as MMO games continue to occupy a prominent position in modern gaming culture, playing MMO games continues to be seen as a highly contentious activity by some scholars as the most problematic type of gaming activity (Kuss, et al, 2012). Meanwhile, some scholars, such as Gordon Calleja and Christopher Ferguson, valiantly disagree

with such assessment (see: Calleja, 2010; Calleja, 2011; Ferguson, 2010). As the debate is very much on-going, scholars on both sides – although far more often from scholars who support such claims – continue to conduct more studies that focus on MMO players (and their motivations for playing MMOs).

The problem with those studies does not concern their focus on the MMO genre, rather it stems from the underlying assumption that motivations for gaming are driven by the games, in the sense that certain elements in videogames make certain types of players want to play videogames. In turn, videogames define how players play, as those elements make those certain types of players do specific things. Ultimately, games define the experiences that players have. For example, Kuss at al. justify their focus on the MMO genre through the argument that 'these games require a high degree of commitment and time investment from the players to the detriment of occupational, social, and other recreational activities and relations' (2012, p. 480). Thus games and gaming are deprived of context and placed in a vacuum, and players are rendered as powerless individuals who are mindlessly drawn to certain videogame content.

Although less common, there have been a notable number of attempts to approach motivations without focusing exclusively on MMO players (for example: Keng et al, 2008; Ryan et al, 2006; Mageau et al, 2011; Ghuman & Griffiths, 2012; Myrseth et al, 2017). Yet similar to studies of MMO players, such studies are all primarily based on surveys – sometimes combined with lab-based experiments or observations. These studies are typically constructed to measure specific attributes derived from existing theoretical instruments, such as passion (for example: Fuster et al, 2014; Keng et al, 2008; Lafrenière et al, 2009; Mageau et al, 2011) and self-determination (Ryan et al, 2016). For example, Ghuman and Griffiths claim that:

> Any new emerging game genre should also be examined and researched in terms of player demographics, why they are played, and what social interactions are involved. (2012, pp. 17-18)

I argue that these studies suffer from the same problems as the studies that focus exclusively on MMO games, which are that such approaches actively decontextualize gaming activity while ignoring players' agency. Such approaches might tell us why certain games are played, but they contribute little to a more comprehensive understanding of why people play games, how people play, and the player-videogame relationship. This is because, referring back to the practice theory model discussed in **CHAPTER 2**, understanding audience's media practice is not just about investigating the relationship between the media content and the media

use, but is also about understanding what the wider practices related to this use are, and also how the use is implemented into gamers' everyday lives (Couldry, 2014, pp. 223-224). Therefore, I ask the following questions: 1) Does the content of games dictate how players play? 2) Do motivations for gaming only reflect participants' in-game actions (namely, gaming)? 3) Do motivations only represent what players want out of games? Although the individual questions are not particularly difficult to answer, I will use them as springboards to elucidate further issues.

Fluid Gaming

Generally speaking, my participants indicated that the content of videogames did not dictate the way they play. Instead, players choose how they would engage with content of a videogame and determine what purpose it will serve. A good example of this can be illustrated by contrasting two participants' remarks on their motivations for playing the same game: **DOTA 2**. **DOTA 2** is an extremely popular Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game; over a dozen participants (mostly Chinese, I will return to this point in greater detail later in the chapter when discussing the notion of skill) mentioned **DOTA 2** or similar MOBA games during interviews. **DOTA 2** is played in the format of 5 versus 5 team combat. Although an online multiplayer game, **DOTA 2**'s fast-paced combat system and highly competitive goal-setting clearly indicate that the game is not intended to be a social platform as MMO games are, as noted by the developers and the publisher of the game. While the publisher, Valve, encourages players to 'Bring your friends and party up' in the game's description on its official digital store front, the publisher actually means:

> **DOTA** is deep, and constantly evolving, but it's never too late to join. Learn the ropes playing co-op vs. bots. Sharpen your skills in the hero demo mode. Jump into the behavior- and skill-based matchmaking system that ensures you'll be matched with the right players each game.[20]

With such an explanation the publisher seems to be less interested advertising **DOTA 2** as a platform where friends can meet up and have fun together. Instead, its emphasis is on assuring new players (even though they were 'late to the party') that their experience would be just as good as their more experienced and skilled friends, even despite the sophisticated and highly competitive nature of the game. In other words, playing with others is more about

[20] http://store.steampowered.com/app/570/Dota_2/, last accessed 17.01.2018.

challenges and cooperation, rather than socialising – and it was indeed played as such according to the vast majority of participants who were playing **DOTA 2** at the time of interview, such as Ms AOlimar, a female Chinese-British participant. She described her reasons for playing **DOTA 2**:

> [**DOTA 2**] is a lot more about teamwork and strategy. And sort of learning the special ability of each character, because you can pick from a quite wide of selections. I like playing it because you can play with other people, I like games that you can play with other people while I live on my own as a student. Apart from that, I think I enjoy it because I have mastered a few character, I can play it quite well. And that sort of, the strategy part of it, works together to beat the other team with your partners, which is good. I don't have any other game is like that, that is why I like to play **DOTA [2]**.

As Ms AOlimar hints in the quote above, she almost always plays with a 'pickup group' (a grouping assigned semi-randomly by the game). Thus by 'play with other people', she means the act of playing multiplayer games with other players. In addition to being able to 'play with other people', the above quote also indicated that she also greatly enjoyed the process of mastering a complicated gameplay system and the sense of achievement in winning games through cooperating with other players. Although also motivated by the social elements of **DOTA 2**, such social elements were clearly not about socialising with friends or family. In fact, as she told me later, her social gaming activities mostly consisted of playing Nintendo console games with her family or boyfriend.

However, some participants did manage to use **DOTA 2** as platform for socialisation, despite its design intention – Mr EFez, a male British participant, who had not played any MMO games, told me that playing **DOTA 2** was primarily about the purpose of socialisation:

> I have been playing a lot of **DOTA 2**, because a lot of my friends are in different parts of the country. So it is the best way to get them on Skype or whatever, to talk. Not just to play. […] I enjoy playing online because this is a way to hang out with friends who I otherwise would struggle to stick around, I guess. Most of my friends want to do something, just chat on the phone is not what they want to do. It is a good way to reconnect with people – if they are into that kind of game you want to play at that time, which can be difficult.

Mr EFez's motivation for playing **DOTA 2** was not driven by the content of **DOTA 2** but because his friends were 'also into that kind of game'. It is certainly not to say that he did not

enjoy playing **DOTA 2**, after all this is also a game he wanted to play, and during the interview he talked extensively about his experience of playing **DOTA 2**. However, as far as one could tell from the interview data, he would probably not have played it if not for his friends. Although **DOTA 2** was not designed to be a social game, he nevertheless managed to make it into one through the particular way he played it, and in turn, his motivation for playing it was not dictated by the game. The way in which the participants talked about their motivation for playing certain games is particularly reminiscent of the notion of 'the meaningful of meaningless' proposed by Ruddock (2007, p. 65). He notes that, for audiences, the meaningful aspects of media consumption are not often the media content, as academia usually conceptualises it through content/textual-analysis (hence 'the meaningless'). To audiences, (experiences of) the very engagements with the content are where the true meanings of the media is actually constructed. This is certainly not to say that media content does not matter – for instance Mr EFez would not be able to turn **DOTA 2** into a platform for socialising with his friends if the game did not allow multiplayer-gaming, but media content does not dictate how audiences could or would experience it, and certainly does not predict what motivation the audience has.

Additionally, it is also noteworthy that Mr EFez used Skype to turn **DOTA 2** into a platform for socialising with his friends. This practice elucidates the second characteristic of motivations for gaming: that they are reflected in players' everyday engagement with the videogame medium in a more general sense (namely, play), not just in their in-game actions (namely, gaming). To further illustrate this argument, Ms SSylvanas, a female British Participant who played MMO games on regular basis, responded to the question 'why do you play games?':

> Why do I? I play videogame because that is what I enjoy doing. I play videogames because that is how I socialise with people. I have friends all over the globe, which I will not have if I was not playing videogames. And it is a way to connect to my husband. I just like playing. It is pretty lame really, I just enjoy it. It is like something I enjoy – like some people enjoy getting drunk, and I enjoy in my pyjama and playing videogames.

Setting aside the rather interesting parallel drawn between drinking and gaming, we can focus on the social aspect that Ms SSylvanas emphasised. Indeed, the overt emphasis on sociality could be correlated to her often MMO gaming activities, however it is not because of playing MMO games that has led her to see her engagement with the videogame medium as

being anchored around sociality. Ms SSylvanas plays a range of different games, many of which are not MMO games – in fact, she told me that the game she played the most at the time of interview was **THE SIMS** franchise, which does not have any prominent in-game multiplayer features. Similarly, it is not that the sociality motivated her to play MMO games. When I asked what she values the most in a videogame – or what kind of game would keep her playing, she replied:

> Probably story? Aesthetic is a close second, challenge, it really depends on the game. Like a lot of games I play are just sandbox, I can do whatever I want.

The 'sandbox' games mentioned by Ms SSylvanas are part of a subgenre of games, often also referred to as open-world games. Such games typically feature exploratory play [or paidia, to use Caillois' term (2001, c1958)] with a high degree of freedom. While some of the sandbox games feature multiplayer segments, the vast majority of these games were designed primarily to be single-player experiences[21], which is to say that only one player is required to carry out the gaming session. In other words, those games do not inherently include social features. Instead of searching for social-able games, she played games in social ways. For example, gaming allowed her to connect with her husband but rather than playing together or even playing the same game, instead they talked about games:

> Although sometimes we sit next to each other and play different games. We do that a lot, cos don't think he can stare at **THE SIMS**'s screen as long as I do. Even when we play completely different games, we still talk to each other, find out stupid things.

As she put it, the sociality of gaming did not stem from the mechanism of videogames, but shared interest in gaming. She used the shared experience as talking points, or 'talk about tokens' as Gee notes (2006, p. 61). The notion of using gaming experience as talk about tokens might seem a straightforward concept, as it simply refers to using knowledge about videogames and gaming experiences as materials to initiate and maintain conversation with other players – just like two film-goers can use their knowledge about films and viewing experiences to talk with each other. However, as I will discuss in the next chapter, participants

[21] Conversely, multiplayer refers to scenarios in which multiple players are required to carry out a gaming session, connected through LAN, internet, or otherwise. This includes cases such as 'playing alone online with strangers'. However, it should be noted that the exact line between the two types of games is not always clearly defined, and neither the industry nor academia seems to have a vested interest in defining it. In this study, the line is loosely drawn along whether a game has 'inherent social-able features', which are mechanisms that actively enables, requires, or encourages two or more players to participate in the same gaming session.

noted that talking about videogames also involved some rather nuanced power-dynamics because of the highly personalised and individualised nature of gaming practices.

Nevertheless, this practice of 'playing in social ways' also extended to Ms SSylvanas' broader gaming-based social activities as well. Playing **THE SIMS** was a highly social experiences for her, because she often discussed the game with other players on internet forums, sharing and exchanging mods and other items she created for the game. For her, talking about games and sharing the experience of gaming was her way of realising the sociality of gaming:

> On gaming forums for each individual games, gaming Reddit and stuff like that, pretty active on that. Talk about it quite a bit, probably more so than normal people.

I am not suggesting that Ms SSylvanas did not socialise in her MMO games – she briefly talked about a few friends made while playing MMO games, and how their friendship had developed through their particular way of playing and had been maintained even when they were 'hopping' between different MMO games. Calling back to the discussion about 'gaming' and 'playing with videogames' in **CHAPTER 1**, Ms SSylvanas' motivation for socialising with people was not only realised through gaming, but also – arguably more so – realised through playing with videogames, by using videogames as platforms for social interaction and relying on the shared gaming experiences as 'talk about tokens'. Therefore, motivations for gaming do not just manifest through doing certain things in games or gaming in particular ways, but ways in which players play with videogames contributes to the experience they are looking for through their engagement with the videogame medium.

Ms SSylvanas' accounts also indicate that motivations for gaming are not just reflected by the player-videogame relationship but also through the relationship's impact on a player's everyday life. In my view, this is the most important point to keep in mind when investigating motivations for gaming. To reiterate, motivations are highly condensed accounts that address the social, emotional and political roles that their relationships with the videogame medium plays in players' everyday lives, but do not just represent what they want out of games. This 'everyday-ness' of their gaming activity was directly expressed by the participants, such as Mr BZHGuo, a male Chinese participant:

> I think [gaming] has already become part of my life, [asking me] why ***not*** playing games is like [asking me] why ***not*** eating food.

Mr BZHGuo emphasised that gaming to him was an important but nevertheless natural component of his everyday life – just like food. This sentiment was expressed by almost all participants at some point during their interviews – even if not as part of their answer to the question 'why do you play videogames?' Fundamentally, the participants' remarks resonate strongly the exact argument that anchors the contemporary academic conceptualisation of audiences and their everyday media uses. Media use is not an isolated, individual occurrence but a part of an audience's everyday life (Moores, 1993, p. 32). Indeed as Moores argues about media use, participants indicated that their play, both gaming and playing with videogames, always takes place in their everyday lives. For the participants, gaming does not magically teleport them out of the physical world where their everyday lives take place. As I will discuss in the next chapter, gaming requires them to make space and time for its implementation. Moreover, adding to Moores' argument, media use as a notion could be extended beyond the direct engagement with the media content. As demonstrated above, motivations for play did not just lead to participants sitting down in front of their computers or consoles and immersing themselves into game-worlds, but a range of other activities – although, as I will discuss later, gaming remains the central pillar of participants' motivations for gaming.

In the same vein, many participants intentionally drew parallels between videogame and other media forms. For example, Mr ARed, a male British participant, answered the question 'when did you start playing?':

> I have been playing videogames since as long as I can remember. To a lot of people, the question when you begin to play videogames, it's just like asking 'when you begin to watch TV', it is just something always there and always present.

In this remark, the notion of 'always there and always present' is particularly noteworthy. Indeed, as Silverstone points out, this permanent presence is exactly how media exists in our everyday lives:

> [Media] are a constant presence in our everyday lives, as we switch in and out, on and off, from one media space, one media connection, to another. […] In public and in private, alone and with others (1999, p. 6).

Similarly, participants' remarks about why they play games and play specific games in particular ways demonstrated that videogames are also a constant presence in players' everyday lives. They play games and play with games in public and in private, solely with games themselves or in conjunction with other media, for the experience provided by the games, or to

build a new multimedia experience on the basis of it. For participants, videogames and playing videogames were common-sense activities. For Silverstone, the position of common-sense in the mundane life is where media is at its most meaningful and most important, therefore from the concept of 'what passed for common sense', we turn to our investigation into the media (1999, p. 6).

To investigate such common-sense highlighted by Silverstone, I will now raise the question: why videogames? As discussed in earlier chapters, to set up and maintain this relationship with the videogame medium is neither cheap nor easy. What is so special about the videogames that players are willing to invest so much time and effort to keep in? Or, to put it simply, 'why do players play videogames?'

Why Play Videogames?

As mentioned above, all participants were asked the question 'Why do you play videogames?' by the end of their respective interviews. Before discussing participants' responses to the question, I would first like to address the political baggage it carries, because 'Why do you play videogames?' is actually a rather awkward question. As videogames are first and foremost entertainment (Newman, 2013), this question could be interpreted as pressuring participants into justifying a part of their every-day lives that, as the participants pointed out themselves, centres on the notion of 'pleasure'. But talking about 'pleasure' of everyday media use is not something we always find comfortable doing. In a broader sense, talking about 'pleasure' of media use is often difficult and more than a little problematic. As Silverstone points out:

> Pleasure is a problem in many ways. We know what we like but will find it difficult to explain why we like what we do. […] We are being told by the cultural policemen of left and right that that the pleasures to be gained from media culture are either undermining or false: that they trivialize, distort; they seduce us from the real world. (1999, p. 48)

What Silverstone reminds us is that 'Why do you play videogames?' is not an easy question – to answer this question is to confront the political baggage that is inherent to explaining pleasure of everyday media use, pleasure that is often labelled as 'undermining' and 'false'. Indeed, one could argue that the pleasures of gaming are often perceived as even more problematic than those derived from uses of other media, because of the wide range of controversies that videogames were (and still are) caught up in, as briefly mentioned in **CHAPTER 1**. Additionally, the videogame medium is particularly prone to the 'seduce us from the real

world' accusation – or escapism – due to its reliance on digital game-worlds (Calleja, 2010; Calleja, 2011) (I will return to the concept of escapism later). As Thornham observes, asking 'Why do you play videogames?' leads to an 'unsettled relationship between pleasure and adulthood which makes the gamers defensive about gaming practices' (2011, p. 157).

While I would hesitate to describe the participants' responses to the question as 'defensive', as suggested, it was clear that my participants found this question awkward perhaps for the reasons discussed above – even after almost two hours of rapport-building through the process of gaming-interview. Participants often repeated the question once just to confirm it, and it usually took them a few seconds of pondering before venturing an answer. This suggests that reflecting on individual 'motivations for gaming' was not a familiar exercise for my participants, or that they found, for whatever reason, the question provoking and challenging in ways that were different from the previous questions (and answers) posed during the interview. One explanation for their hesitation might be offered when we consider that many of my participants told me that (during or outside interviews) they were amazed and bemused by the very existence of this project. Some found it amazing that the videogame medium and gaming were eventually being taken 'seriously' as an academic subject, and some were bemused by the idea of 'seriously' investigating something they considered to be rather insignificant. This suggests that the very act of validating an emotional or personal decision was an unfamiliar one in relation to this particular medium.

If this question relates to pleasure and is fraught with issues and contradictions, this is also exactly why this question is worth asking. Asking the participants why they play videogames is to both investigate the aspects of gaming experience that the participants considered to be most enticing, as well as to explore how participants articulate those aspects. The former elucidates how videogames are experienced and perceived, whereas the latter helps us to understand how socio-cultural contexts contribute to their experience and perception. Taken together, investigating exactly what kinds of pleasure is to be found in playing games from the players' perspective contributes to the empirical goal of this study of investigating players' understandings of their relationships with the videogame medium.

Fun, What Fun?

When confronted by the question 'Why do you play videogames?', almost all participants immediately brought up the notion of fun, here are some examples:

> Ms KFreddie: It makes me happy; it is fun, intellectually stimulating… not really.
>
> Mr LJason: Because it is fun way to spend my spare time and it is good to run wild.

> Mr QWang: Because games are fun, and I like playing it.

But why is playing videogames fun? My participants also naturally came to this question, and they seemed to be baffled by the concept. It could be best seen here expressed by Mr ALink, a male British participant:

> Just as I said, just to relax and get lost in a world that is not my own to escape the real world – it is actually a really hard question. I wanted to say that because I always have fun with it… But I try to think why I have fun with it…

The expression 'I know it is fun but I do not know exactly why' was shared by all participants, which is to say all my participants responded to the question 'why do you play videogames' with 'fun' (or some equivalent), but they all struggled to immediately articulate what 'fun' meant – it usually took some thought. Exactly as Silverstone claimed, participants succinctly demonstrated the difficulty of explaining the pleasure of media use (1999, p. 48). Participants knew that they found play enjoyable, and they knew that play was 'fun', and 'fun' was why they were playing it, but they were not very sure exactly why it was so, as Mr EFez described:

> Fun is for a lot of people – there was a thing a while back ago on the internet, whereas people [say that], you are not allowed to use fun a description for a game, cos that does not defend against any critique. People has been complaining about **SKYRIM** being shit for X, Y, [and] Z reasons. Then I was like, that is fun. [But I] can't use that as an argument against it being shit, [because people say] there are all these other ways [to argue that this game is shit]. But I think it is.
>
> Fun-ness is a quite nebulous thing, but it definitely is a concept for playing a game. A game you grind through, they are not fun, but they can be enjoyable in some other ways. But I, at least now, prefer to play a fun game for a short period of time, than grinding through a lot of game, just to get to the gold nugget at the end of game, which is reward. That is why I never had any drive to get good at any fighting games.

The game Mr EFez was talking about is **ELDER SCROLL: SKYRIM**, which is often referred to as an 'open-world action role-playing game'. It puts the player in an enormous world that is filled with objects, non-player characters and quests. The game is highly acclaimed amongst both videogame critics and players[22]. Simply put, it is a game considered to be 'fun' by the

[22] According to popular review aggregate website Metacritics.com, the game received an average of 84% from critics, and an average of 81% from users: http://www.metacritic.com/game/switch/the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim, last accessed 01/03/2018.

vast majority of its players. However, the game is also plagued by numerous flaws, such as technical glitches, storyline inconsistency, and poorly executed combat systems. These flaws are as widely criticised as the game is praised. Mr EFez's remark is particularly interesting because it indicates a three-layer-structure from game (media content) to the eventual subjective experience of fun. On the bottom is the game content, in the middle is the moment-to-moment play experience ('play a fun game for a short period of time', or 'grinding to get to the gold nugget'), and on the top is the subjective perception of fun. Each of the layers offers different explanations to the overall motivation for gaming as a reflection of the player-videogame relationship. This idea of a layered structure that explains one particular entity parallels what Andrew Collier refers to as 'stratification' (1994, p. 131). This is a notion I will return to many times throughout the following chapters, so it would be worthwhile unpacking it further here.

Stratification (of Knowledge)

I argue we could use this iteration of stratification to better understand participants' remarks and existing literature about motivation for gaming. For participants' remarks, I argue that the 'tree' is useful in mapping their comments in relation to each other, to therefore more accurately position my discussion in relation to the overall task of this chapter of using motivation for gaming to investigate the player-videogame relationship. To illustrate that, let us revisit the three layers mentioned above in Mr EFez's earlier remark. He mentioned that certain game content could be described as 'not fun' (or 'shit' in his words), which indicated that players considered that videogame content could motivate or deter players to play a game. He mentioned that he preferred to play in certain ways more than others, which indicates that there are different motivations for moment-to-moment in-gaming activity (gaming). Finally, he talked about the notion of 'fun' as his motivation for gaming in his everyday gaming. I argue each of the layers could be seen as its own stratum, and each contributes to an understanding of motivation for gaming as a reflection of player-videogame relations. More importantly, Collier's view of 'stratification' and the three principles help us to better understand how each layer relates the other. I will elaborate on this concept further in the next paragraph.

The first principle, 'ontological presupposition', certainly applies in the present case. Experiencing fun in everyday gaming could not be sustained if a player did not play videogames, and playing videogames as an activity assumes certain content motivates players to do so. The second principle, 'non-transitive vertical explanation', is an important one that could

make sense of Mr EFez's discussion about whether fun could excuse certain flawed aspects in a game, or whether certain flawed aspects could deny the subjective perception of fun. Fun indeed does not defend against criticism made about flaws, because fun as a notion resides on the stratum of 'motivation for gaming in everyday context' it could explain how players play in certain ways (the middle stratum), but it could not move to a stratum further down the structure, namely whether a specific part of content motivates or deters players. By the same token, however, criticism made about flaws in a game also does not nullify the subjective experience of fun, because it could not directly reach the top stratum without addressing how players actually play. This is probably why people would argue a (deeply) flawed game could still be fun, because it could still be perceived as fun, as one could play the game that generates fun despite the flaws. This forced transit between strata, in my view, is also why many psychological studies have failed to understand what fun actually means (I will return to this idea later). The last principle, 'composition', is by-no-means the least: without game content that motivates players, they would be not be motivated in moment-to-moment gaming, and certainly no fun would be had.

The notion of stratification not only helps us to understand Mr EFez's remarks about fun with flawed games, it also points out how fun as motivation for gaming should be investigated. Both stratification and Mr EFez imply that each stratum exists independently from each other, hence they are not interchangeable. In other words, fun does not parallel other concepts that describe the enjoyment of gaming (for example, a sense of achievement and sociality). Instead, fun is an overarching concept that describes motivation for gaming in its entirety. Simply put, fun should not be mistaken for a component of a stratum, but as a stratum in-and-of itself. A good example of such a mistake (of failing to recognise fun as its own stratum) in action is the psychological study by Bobby Hoffman and Louis Nadelson (2010) titled **MOTIVATIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND VIDEO GAMING: A MIXED METHODS STUDY**, a rare case in which the researchers combine instrument-driven, survey-based qualitative methods and interview-based qualitative methods. This study indicated that fun was the most mentioned concept – without specifying the exact frequency – when interviewees accounted for their motivation for gaming. Yet despite describing fun as 'auspice', Hoffman and Nadelson's study only explains it through the notion of sense of achievement obtained through overcoming cognitively challenging encounters (2010, pp. 260-261), which effectively turns fun into an equivalent of another 11 descriptors of motivation for gaming used in the study. As a result, the study appears to be baffled by the thought that players do not play games for the sake

of learning skills, even though they consider that learning (as in learning the game-world and learning how to play effectively in it) is required to overcome challenges in a game:

> Our results represent a conundrum for researchers who speculated that video gaming is a context for academic learning and opportunistic pedagogy. […] Participants did not perceive, nor enter into video gaming with an educational intention. (Hoffman & Nadelson, 2010, p. 266)

In my view, the difficulty in correlating the motivation for learning the game-world to motivation for gaming that Hoffman and Nadelson describe lies in the fact that their study fails to acknowledge that these are descriptions on two different strata. Indeed, as the authors observe, players experiment with in-game objects in different ways with the purpose of learning the rules and working out their preferred way to play the game. This process of learning game-worlds resides on the middle stratum, which addresses motivation for in-game activities. However, the motivation for gaming that their study aimed to investigate rests on the highest stratum, namely why gaming appeals to players in a more general sense, beyond the context of moment-to-moment gaming sessions. While the latter stratum indeed ontologically presupposes the former, meaning the former explains the latter to some extent, they are not interchangeable. In this case, the sense of achievement through learning and overcoming challenges explains why players carry out certain in-game actions and partially informs us about why gaming is 'fun', so to speak – it does not directly translate to the motivation for gaming beyond the immediate context of moment-to-moment gaming. A sense of achievement through learning and overcoming challenge is not 'fun', it only addresses an element that contributes to fun. Forcefully pressing knowledge generated by one stratum into the higher one without acknowledging the relationship between the two strata is probably what caused the 'conundrum' for Hoffman and Nadelson. To avoid falling into a similar pitfall, this study will aim to examine 'fun' in its entirety.

In the discussion above, the notion of stratification serves a very similar function to other concepts such as Kuhn's incommensurability (Kuhn, 1962, c2012; Kuhn, 2000), which is often seen as a way to discuss the differences between scientific paradigms (Sankey, 1993). In our case the 'paradigms' are the different ways in which players talk about their motivation for gaming. However, unlike incommensurability, which is more interested in understanding and reconciling the differences (through changes) (Kuhn, 1962, c2012, pp. 91-92), stratification is more interested in observing the constant object of discussion – the videogame medium in

our case – and how the knowledge transcends different strata (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 161). Therefore, stratification is useful not only in helping us to avoid pitfalls like those discussed above, but also in highlighting the role of the videogame medium in the different ways players talk about videogames. Furthermore, Collier's iteration addresses one of the more notable aspects that Bhaskar's model passes over: the inter-stratum relations (Collier, 1994, p. 131), which are addressed through the three principles discussed above. In this sense, Collier's iteration of stratification moves further away from tasks such as finding the rigid boundaries between strata, but more towards the goal of understanding how the knowledge transcends through strata. This is crucial in the case of the present project, because its very goal is to develop a player-centric approach to the videogame medium, not just to understand the different ways players talk about videogames. More broadly speaking, Collier's iteration of stratification speaks directly to Couldry's 'practice theory' (2014), discussed in **CHAPTER 2**. As a reminder, practice theory forms the methodological cornerstone of this project, and the core idea of 'practice theory' is that:

> Instead of starting out from the simple division of media research into studying "the text" or the production or reception of "the text", it explores in a more open way the mass of things people do and say (and indeed believe) that are oriented to, or related to, media. (2014, p. 217)

Correspondingly, stratum one resides in the realm of *studying "the text"*, stratum two in that of *reception of "the text"*, and stratum three addresses the *mass of things people do and say (and indeed believe) that are oriented to, or related to, media*. I will revisit stratification in **CHAPTER 7** and discuss its implications on the player-centric approach to the videogame medium that I am advocating for.

With the three principles discussed above, especially 'ontological presumption' and 'composition', we could not only distinguish the different ways in which players talk about videogames and how each of these speak to the specific subject of enquiry, but also uncover a continuous thread that connects all of the different ways together – the videogame medium. As such, it will allow us to develop a more systematic and nuanced theorisation of how players talk about videogames and their relationship with them – through motivation for gaming, gaming as an activity, or their notion of gaming skill, as illustrated in the table below. While this chapter focus primarily on the third stratum, later chapters devote more space to discussion of the other two strata in relation to the third.

TABLE 1: STRATIFICATION OF KNOWLEDGE APPLIED TO THE CONCEPTS OF MOTIVATION, GAMING, AND SKILL

	Motivation	Gaming	Skill
Stratum One	Motivation deduced from analysing video-game content	Particular way of gaming deduced from analysing videogame content	Gaming skill deduced from analysing video-game content
Stratum Two	Motivation for moment-to-moment gaming and in-game activities	Things players do in moment-to-moment gaming	Gaming skill player use in moment-to-moment gaming
Stratum Three	Motivation for gaming in everyday context	Gaming as direct engagement with the videogame medium in everyday context	Gaming skill as one concept in everyday context

The Five-spices of Fun

As much as pleasure – or fun – is difficult to explain, all of my participants gave more detailed explanations of fun after some contemplation. To understand the notion of fun in its entirety, I compiled all participants' explanations into one notion. The exact elements cited as fun varied from one participant to another, but regularly included the broader ideas of: 1) active engagement; 2) game of make-believe; 3) escapism; 4) platform for social interaction; and 5) sense of achievement. In a crude sense, I consider this to be what my participants collectively considered as 'what is fun about videogames'. Whilst play as a platform for social interaction has already been touched upon above, to illustrate how participants typically talk about the other four frames, let us take a look at two participants' responses to the question: why do you play videogames? The first is by Mr JJones, a male German participant:

> It is mainly for the reason that I can experience things that I can't in real world. Because the developers created these worlds, fictional worlds, just… just like experiencing their vision of other worlds, and at the same time having fun while controlling it. To put in one sentence, is to escape the real world.

This remark specifically highlights three elements that are argued to be at the core of gaming experience. The experience of entering fictional worlds could be described as a game of make-believe (Klimmt, et al, 2009; Selnow, 1984; Granic, et al, 2014); interacting with the

fictional world relates to the notion of active engagement (Raessens, 2005); and 'escaping the real world' could be described as escapism (Calleja, 2010; Calleja, 2011; Shaw, 2010). Sense of achievement is represented in this remark made by Mr EFez:

> There is a nice sense of achievement if you complete something that is difficult, also you complete something that other people have failed to do.

Completing challenges and achieving goals are pleasurable – or fun in various contexts (Higgins, 2006; Roedel, et al, 1994), playing videogames is certainly one such context (Hoffman & Nadelson, 2010; Myrseth, et al, 2017).

As I will discuss each frame in much greater depth later, I should first emphasis that not mentioning certain frame(s) does not mean the participant had never played a game for that purpose. For instance, although only three of the five frames were mentioned in Mr JJones' response to the question 'why do you play videogames', all five frames were talked about during the course of the interview. He mentioned playing and talking games with his girlfriend as a way of bonding (in fact he was recommended to this study by his girlfriend, who also participated in it). On the other hand, he told me that sometimes he also played for the challenge. Hence I argue that all five frames have motivated him to play certain games in certain ways (the middle stratum), however he did not consider the other two to be as important to the fun of gaming (the highest stratum). It is also noteworthy that his articulation of fun – namely that the fun of videogames is foremost rooted in the interactive escapist game of make-believe – was shared by the majority of participants. Actually, fewer than ten participants (out of 50) drew on sociality to explain 'fun', whereas less than one-third of the participants enlisted the sense of achievement through overcoming challenges as a reason for gaming being fun. Both are evident departures from existing literature on motivation for non-genre-specific gaming, as a notable number of previous studies indicate that players cited sociality as the main reason for gaming (for example: Shaw, 2010; Thornham, 2009; Hoffman & Nadelson, 2010), whereas almost all studies mentioned so far strongly emphasise that overcoming challenges is the main source of enjoyment. I will return to both incongruities later; for now, let us focus on the three most mentioned reason for why gaming is fun: escapism, active engagement and the game of make-believe.

Modern Autonomous Imaginative Hedonism

If we are to describe the videogame medium using participants' remarks on why gaming is fun, we might say that games are interactive escapist games of make-believe that offer chal-

lenges and sometimes function as platforms for social interactions, with the 'interactive escapist game of make-believe' being the core experience. One way to understand the fun of interactive escapist games of make-believe can be found in Colin Campbell's **THE ROMANTIC ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF MODERN CONSUMERISM** (1987). Campbell describes what he believes to be the 'spirit of modern consumerism', namely 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism':

> In modern, self-illusory hedonism, the individual is much more an artist of the imagination, someone who takes images from memory or the existing environment, and rearranges or otherwise improves them in his mind in such a way that they become distinctly pleasing. No longer are they "taken as given" from past experience, but crafted into unique products, pleasure being the guiding principle. In this sense, the contemporary hedonist is a dream artist, the special psychic skills possessed by modern man making this possible. Crucial to this process is the ability to gain pleasure from the emotions so aroused, for, when the images are adjusted, so too are the emotions. As a direct consequence, convincing day-dreams are created, such that individuals react subjectively to them as if they were real. This is the distinctively modern faculty, the ability to create an illusion which is known to be false but felt to be true. The individual is both actor and audience in his own drama, "his own" in the sense that he constructed it, stars in it, and constitutes the sum total of the audience. (1987, p. 78)

Before moving on to discuss how this concept applies to fun as a motivation for gaming, I would first like to discuss this concept in more general terms. As mentioned in the last chapter, Campbell regards 'an apparently endless pursuit of wants' as 'the mystery of modern consumerism' (1987, p. 37). As an effort to make sense of such mystery, he devised this notion to theorise the desire and wants that drive modern consumption. Indeed, as clearly stated by the author (Campbell, 1987), this particular volume is very much inspired by and modelled after Max Weber's classic work on Protestant ethics and its relation to modern capitalism, particular that related to leisure (Weber, 1974/1930; Berkers & Eijck, 2017). Similarly to Weber, Campbell's work is more concerned with examining 'the processes through which a previously denigrated pattern of conduct', namely individualised pleasure-seeking activities, 'became not simply accepted but highly valued' (Campbell, 2003, p. 796) by modern consumerist society. In other words, the main goal of Campbell's 1987 volume is to sociologically understand the emergence of consumption and consumer culture in Western society with particular reference to Protestant values and Romantic ethics (Campbell, 2003, pp.

795-796). As historical development is not the focus of the present study, I will not discuss this particular aspect further.

Taken on its own, 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' is presented as a discussion about modern pleasure-seeking activities as a societal function – or a social institution, if you will – in the sense that it focuses on analysing how individuals tend to behave when they are engaging with modern pleasure-seeking activities. As such, this particular notion could often be found in sociological discussions about consumerism and consumer culture (see: Varul, 2013; Langer, 2002, pp. 72-73; Boden & Williams, 2002; Chronis et al, 2012, pp. 263 & 282). As pointed out by critics and Campbell himself, 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' does not address all aspects of types of consumerist activities practiced by modern consumers (Boden & Williams, 2002; Chronis, et al, 2012, pp. 263 & 282), but just the modern aspects of consumer activities with a 'bourgeois' thinking process behind them (Campbell, 2003, pp. 796-797). Simply put, the notion of modern autonomous imaginative hedonism is deliberately political and welcomes further discussion.

With this in mind, there are three reasons why I chose 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' as a tool for understanding my participants' remarks about fun as their motivation for gaming over other concepts, such as immersion/'incorporation' (Calleja, 2011), escapism (Vorderer, et al, 2004), identification (Klimmt, et al, 2009; Shaw, 2014), performance (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006), or other psychology-based concepts. Firstly, Campbell's concept captures, or at the very least encompasses, every element that my participants ascribed to the notion of 'fun' as motivation for gaming, as I will demonstrate in the following sections. Moreover, modern videogames[23] not only perfectly embody modern autonomous imaginative hedonism, but also elevate it to another level.

To my knowledge, this level of comprehensiveness is unparalleled. Indeed, Calleja's 'incorporation' model comes close, but his framework is built on an obliviousness towards the stratification of knowledge. This is best shown in Calleja's account of fun proposed by Huizinga in his work **HOMO LUDENS** (1950, pp. 3,22), as Calleja states:

[23] By 'modern videogames', I am referring to videogames that were first published in the late 2000s. This view was largely informed by my participants, as the vast majority of videogames they mentioned during interviews were released post-2008. Games released prior to 2008 were mostly mentioned as nostalgia items or memorabilia of early gaming experiences. One notable difference between games release before and after 2008 is that audio-visual representation is of significantly higher fidelity (Tavinor, 2009), which compliments the increasingly more sophisticated rule-systems (Juul, 2005, 2009). Such games are also most often discussed in existing literature.

> *Fun* merely implies a clustering of positive emotions surrounding an activity; it does not describe what those emotions are or where they derive from. […] It is more productive to focus on a notion of engagement or involvement, which has less normative implication than the notion of fun […] Fun lacks the qualities of an analytically productive term. (2011, p. 52)

Although the excerpt above accurately pointing out the ambiguity of the term fun, the mistake Calleja made in his criticism on Huizinga's concept of fun is very similar to that which Hoffman and Nadelson (2010) made about their participants' accounts of fun in the discussion above. That is to say that Calleja is trying to replace, but not explain, a higher stratum concept (fun) with lower stratum analysis (a notion of 'engagement or involvement'). By claiming 'fun' cannot be broken down further (Huizinga, 1950, p. 22), Huizinga is emphasising that fun as a notion should not be reduced to 'any other mental category' or moment-to-moment mechanism that contributes to it (the example he gave is masked play in scare rituals), but seen in its entirety. Using modern terminology, fun to Huizinga has an emergent quality (Collier, 1994, p. 158), which is to say that if we are able to analyse which emotions contribute to the fun of gaming, we should not be able to claim that fun is nothing but those emotions. Referring back to the concept of stratification (of knowledge), Huizinga implies that, ahead of his time perhaps, fun resides on its own stratum, which could be explained, but not replaced, by knowledge of other strata.

This leads to the second reason why 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' is useful for understanding my participants' notions of fun, which is that it addresses enjoyment of pleasure-seeking activities in its entirety on the stratum of everyday life. As argued in the discussion about stratification, I see the notion of 'fun' as my participants' conceptualisation of their motivation for everyday gaming, which speaks to the third stratum – the stratum of player-videogame relations in an everyday context. Such an approach demands a theoretical framework that is able to address motivation beyond moment-to-moment gaming activities but as part of a player's everyday life, and 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' speaks to this particular demand more effectively than any of the frameworks mentioned above. 'Modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' was developed to adequately 'account for the nature of modern consumerism' (Campbell, 1987, p. 88), hence it inherently considers pleasure-seeking activities as a fixture of the everyday, not just as part of separate occasions of consumption. Moreover, not only does Campbell's notion conceptualise pleasure-seeking activities as an everyday fixture, it also understands pleasure (and want, as well as desire) as an emergent concept. In other words, 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' allows

us to understand the fun of gaming as the sum of enjoyment people derive from everyday gaming, but not to reduce it into outcomes of certain mechanisms, psychological or otherwise, as other approaches tend to do.

The third reason for drawing on 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' is the deliberate political nature of Campbell's framework. As stated by Campbell himself, his entire volume has an overt focus on theorising modern consumerism as a 'modern non-rational bourgeois' pleasure-seeking activity (Campbell, 2003, p. 796). Such a conceptualisation invites discussions about the socio-political aspects of pleasure-seeking activities. It should be clear by now that I am very much determined to begin unpacking the socio-political aspects of my participants' remarks, which is inherent to the theoretical backdrop of this study, namely European/British Audience Studies, Media Studies, and, more broadly, Cultural Studies. In this study, I particularly focus on discussing the consumer capitalist and neoliberal framing of the player-videogame relation expressed by my participants, as showcased in the previous chapter, and I will return to it later. The concept of 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' allows me to do all of that, because the 'bourgeois virtual' (or bourgeoisie), 'consumerism/consumer capitalism' and 'neoliberalism' are intrinsically interwoven with each other (see: 'bourgeois' to 'consumerism': Campbell, 1987, pp. 223-224; 'neoliberalism' to 'consumer capitalism': Lewis, 2013, pp. 20-21; 'bourgeois' to 'neoliberalism': Harvey, 2005, p. 181). On the other hand, although I will not discuss the notion of modernity in gaming (as it is beyond the scope of this project), James Ash's **THE INTERFACE ENVELOPE: GAMING, TECHNOLOGY, POWER** (2015) excellently illustrates the inherent modernity in modern digital media through analysis of their interfaces, particularly in videogames.

To summarise, I use 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' to understand my participants' conceptualisation of fun as motivation for gaming, because: 1) it comprehensively encompasses every aspect of fun that I am going to discuss; 2) it allows me to discuss the notion of 'fun' in the context of everyday life; and 3) it enables me to discuss the socio-political implications of my participants' notions of fun. In the following sections, I firstly elaborate on how the fun of gaming could be understood through the framework of modern autonomous imaginative hedonism, secondly how videogames have elevated it to the next level of enjoyment, and lastly the implication of this effect.

Active Engagement

Campbell devotes much time to describing the 'autonomous' aspect of the 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism':

> The individual is much more an artist of the imagination, someone who takes images from memory or the existing environment, and rearranges or otherwise improves them in his mind in such a way that they become distinctly pleasing. No longer are they "taken as given" from past experience, but crafted into unique products, pleasure being the guiding principle. (1987, p. 78)

He describes a process in which an individual takes existing materials and reconfigures them in ways that are appealing to them; the use of material is no longer passively receiving given information, but is involved in a process of active engagement. This exactly aligns with how my participants described the fun of gaming, as represented by the following remark from Mr DSonic, a male British participant:

> And the sense of agency it gives you, every other type of electronic entertainment is passive. And I know the agency is restricted to the rules of the game, it is scripted and you have to do what you have to do, but I supposes it is more like the director of the films rather than just watch the film. You have been given the tools to do those things.

As discussed in **CHAPTER 1**, allowing users to reconfigure content is the key feature that differentiates the videogame medium from traditional media (Raessens, 2005). Videogames require players to constantly rearrange their content in ways that they see fit (Sherry, et al, 2006; Newman, 2009). Although, as Mr DSonic points out, a player's agency is limited by the game's rules, it nevertheless means that, with videogames, in Campbell's terms, players are able to take more than just 'images' and concrete digital items from the 'existing environment', 'rearrange or otherwise improve them' not only 'in [their] mind' but also in the tangible digital environment, 'in such a way that they become distinctly pleasing' (1987, p. 78). Moreover, such tangible reconfiguration/rearrangement will continue to take place as long as the gaming lasts, because gaming consists of loops: 'reconfigure – interpreting feedback – further reconfigure'. Because players are the ones who are doing the reconfiguration and they have a certain degree of freedom while doing so (see **CHAPTER 1**), this contributes to an experience that is distinctively personal and emotional for each player, and videogames are designed to facilitate this process and amplify the personal and emotional aspects of the experience (see: Atkins, 2003; Tavinor, 2005; Klimmt et al 2009; Wendler, 2014). Thereupon rests the first reason why I argue gaming is a practice of modern autonomous imaginative hedonism, because, as Campbell describes:

> Crucial to this process is the ability to gain pleasure from the emotions so aroused, for, when the images are adjusted, so too are the emotions. (1987, p. 78)

The active engagement allows the videogame medium to become the epitome of a game of make-believe.

Game of Make-Believe

Campbell goes on to describe what this kind of rearrangement – or reconfiguration as it termed in this study – means for the hedonist practice:

> As a direct consequence, convincing day-dreams are created, such that individuals react subjectively to them as if they were real. This is the distinctively modern faculty, the ability to create an illusion which is known to be false but felt to be true. (1987, p. 78)

Entering day-dreams 'as if they were real' is how my participants described why gaming is fun. Aside from the earlier remark from Mr JJones, the vast majority of participants described the concept of 'fun' in similar ways. For example, as elaborated on by Mr TKratos:

> When you play a game, you entered a different world, you can exercise your imagination, [videogames are] where you can release your imaginations.

More specifically, the participants highlighted two types of imagination exercises. The first one is that the videogame medium could also provide platforms for players to realise their own imagination to some extent (as much as the games allow), such as described by Mr PHJi:

> One thing is that [I] can realise things that I cannot do in the physical-world. For example playing sports games – I probably could never become an athlete, for example a footballer. But in games, you could even make an avatar with your own look, realising dreams that otherwise impossible, and get some sense of achievement.

The second is experiencing the imaginations of others – the game developers' to be specific; as Mr TKratos continued:

> I think there is something that the developers maybe can understand it better, because they have something in their brain and they can put it into a videogame content, they literally share their imagination with you, and it is great to experience that. I mean, some people like to put it into books, some people like to put it into movies, but I prefer to experience it in videogames.

I argue that videogames do not create highly realistic 'day-dreams', instead they create 'day-dreams' that are digitally real, because unlike traditional 'day-dreams', those of videogames can be engaged with directly, tangibly and even tactilely. To illustrate this argument, we need to take a closer look at the notion of 'day-dream', and I argue that it could be done through the frame of a game of make-believe. This is a term popularised by Walton (1990) to theorise the experience that representational, fictional arts provoke. He argues that props – the items/objects in the fiction that represent something else (such as a character's name in a novel, or a figurine in a child's play) – play fundamental roles in vitalising fictional worlds, because they constitute what Walton refers to as 'fictional truth' (1990, p. 43). Simply put, props represent things that they are not. In traditional fictional arts, the props are descriptive phrases, images (still or moving), or figurines. In videogames, the props are the digital items – characters, inanimate objects, special effects (such as explosions). What is unique about the props in videogames is that they are tactilely malleable in a digital sense (Klimmt, et al, 2009).

Taking a fictional chair for example: an audience could imagine taking any action they desire with a fictional chair depicted in a book, painting, or film, however the prop (chair) would never change in the representation as the consequence of an audience's imagination. However, a chair in a videogame typically could be interacted with to some extent, with audio-visual signals representing the process and consequence of such digital interactions – to sit on it, to paint it with a different colour, or at the very least knocking it over and kicking it around. In this sense, although a digital chair in a game world is not physically real, it is nevertheless digitally real – it is a real chair composed of codes, as material as a physical one composed of wood. While still ontologically differently from a physical chair, the digital materiality of the digital chair is far more effective in representing a physical chair, namely functioning as a prop. Therefore, the props in videogames are more effective in realising the tactile imaginations of both players and game designers.

The tangibly interactive nature of digital props provided by videogames forms the foundation of the second type of imagination exercise: experiencing the imagination of others (game developers). Not only could the props be tactilely interacted with by players, they can also be arranged to react to players in specific ways as per the game developers' intent. This allows the developers to present their imaginations in ways that are more vivid and nuanced than traditional media could offer. For example, while an author or a director would only be able to present a conversation in one direction, videogame developers could actually imple-

ment as many branches as their resources allow to depict a character in greater depth – similar to other non-character prompts, the digitally real characters are also more effective in conveying imagination in videogames.

More importantly, the digitally real 'day-dream' does not replace the fictional ones. Players could still mobilise materials from memory to imagine how they would play, or how they would live their lives in the fictional worlds presented in videogames. In this sense, the videogame medium adds an additional layer to the 'day-dream': the first layer is the digitally real 'day-dream' that takes place inside the game-world during gaming, in which players engage with the game of make-believe to realise their own imaginations or experience the game designers'. The second layer is the fictional 'day-dream' that takes place outside game-worlds, in which players imagine the fun of gaming or living in the fictional worlds depicted by the videogames. The two-layered structure of videogame 'day-dream' will be revisited in later chapters. I suggest that videogames create games of make-believe that take place not in the imagination, but in reality – digital reality, that is. Indeed, digital reality is fundamentally different from physical reality because it is composed of completely different material and exists in an ontologically different way. But day-dreaming through playing videogames is not 'false but felt to be true', it feels true because it is true, but only in a digital way. Moreover, videogames are more than just day-dreams, because videogames also have challenges.

(The Underwhelming) Sense of Achievement

Returning to the element of sense of achievement that was raised earlier – this element further contributes to the interactive game of make-believe, arguably perfecting the escapist nature of gaming. As discussed in **CHAPTER 1**, a rule-system is an essential component of any videogame (Juul, 2009; Juul, 2005), and the vast majority of videogames offer challenges for players to overcome (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003). In turn, the joy of triumphing over challenges is argued to be one of the more important reasons why gaming is considered to be fun and thus enjoyed by so many players (Juul, 2009; Juul, 2013; Lankoski, 2011; McAllister & Ruggill, 2010), is argued to be a main component of the player-videogame relationship (see: Juul, 2013; Ohler & Nieding, 2006; Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006; Calleja, 2010; Sutton-Smith, 1997), and ties in with the motivation for gaming in particular (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, c1990; Christopher J. Ferguson, 2012; Yee, 2007; Przybylski, et al, 2009). Yet, as mentioned above, a relatively small number of participants referred to a sense of achievement as a reason for why gaming is fun or in answer to the question of why they play videogames. The question is, then, why does such an apparently fundamental aspect of videogames and the gaming experience receive such underwhelming attention from my participants?

In my view, this is because the videogame medium has changed. Developers are growing more skilled at using the ever-more capable technological tools to use videogames as vehicle for presenting modern autonomous imaginative hedonist day-dreams that feature challenges, but not challenges with colourful graphics. Therefore, the sense of achievement from overcoming challenges is growing gradually less prominent when players think of the fun of gaming. Challenges are less often the 'feature presentation' of a videogame, but more often work in conjunction with other systems of the game to deliver a more vivid day-dream experience. This allows the gaming experience to yield more pleasure, because, as Campbell points out:

> Day-dreaming can perhaps best be envisaged as an activity which mixes the pleasures of fantasy with those of reality. […] Activity directed at enhancing the pleasures to be gained from reality merges into attempts to actualize the "dream". (1987, p. 85)

In videogames, especially modern ones, the audio-visual presentation serves the role of actualising the 'dream', whereas the challenges enhance the pleasure from the imagination, while also supplying its own pleasures. This is illustrated in Mr PHJi, a Chinese participant's, answer to the question 'why do you play videogames?', which is briefly discussed above:

> One thing is that [I] can realise things that I cannot do in the physical-world. For example playing sports games – I probably could never become a professional athlete, for example a footballer. But in games, you could even make an avatar with your own look, realising dreams that otherwise impossible, and get some sense of achievement.

In this example, becoming a professional footballer is the 'day-dream'. As the visual-audio presentation creates the scenario of a football stadium and a footballer that has his look, the challenges represents the hardship that a footballer needs to undergo to reach the goal. Therefore, when Mr PHJi successfully scores a goal with his avatar, he not only takes pleasure in seeing 'himself' celebrating on the turf, but the pleasure is further enhanced by the 'real' pleasure of overcoming the challenges provided by the game. Such is a typical way through which designers of modern videogames compose audio-visual representation and challenges.

As Tavinor noted, this particular way of organically combining representation and challenges is relatively modern (2009). This is because, as Juul (2005) pointed out, early digital technology could not offer the audio-visual fidelity that is necessary to create any convincing representation. I would add that early digital technology also could not provide the computational capacity to calculate the highly complex rule-sets that are necessary to deliver challenges

found in modern games. And as games are becoming increasingly 'life-like' in their presentation, challenges – for the majority of players who do not seek out particularly difficult challenges – are less prominent on their own, existing more as part of the day-dream. Challenges are not becoming any less important, but their role is shifting, which is why my participants typically did not single out a sense of achievement as a component of the fun of gaming, whereas academic literature almost universally argues otherwise.

The underwhelming emphasis on the sense of achievement by participants does not contradict its theoretical importance to the fun of gaming. Rather, it is folded into the fun of active engagement and the game of make-believe. Combining high fidelity audio-visual representations and complex interactive systems that also offer enticing challenges, the videogame medium offers an experience that is uniquely fun and never before seen in other entertainment medium, as described by Mr ALink, a male British participant:

> I see them a bit also like an art form of themselves. Something like books, similar but different. […] They offer something new within that experience.

Referring back to the notion of stratification, the theoretical importance of sense of achievement to the fun of gaming is established on the stratum of 'experience of gaming', whereas my participants' responses to the question 'why do you play videogames' directly addresses the stratum of the 'fun of gaming'. As such, a sense of achievement becomes less prominent as a self-standing element when the participants addressed the fun of gaming in its entirety. Overcoming challenges was mentioned by almost all participants when they were talking about a specific game or a particular gaming experience, but the 'sense of achievement' blended into the fun of gaming as modern autonomous imaginative hedonist activity. I will discuss this seemingly paradoxical way in which my participants accounted for their everyday gaming experiences in greater depth in **CHAPTER 6**. For now, I will further illustrate the underwhelming foci of this notion in a more general way through unpacking my participants' remarks on gaming as an activity of escapism.

Escapism

Over two-thirds of my participants – both Western and Chinese, female and male – cited escapism when explaining the fun of gaming, although the vast majority of these remarks were made in succinct fashion, such as Mr ZHZen, a male Chinese participant:

> For fun! All gaming is for is fun. On top of that, gaming is a way to escape from real-life. My answer is really simply – like the philosophy of Nintendo, to make people happy.

Two things are noteworthy in Mr ZHZen's remark. First, he did not shy away from using the phrase 'escape from real-life' despite its negative connotations. Second, he strongly emphasised the 'fun' and 'happiness' that the videogame medium brings while doing so. I will return to the first point in a moment; for now I would like to examine why gaming was described as an escapist activity and why this form of escapism was considered to be particularly fun by the participants.

The first half of the question – why gaming was described as escapist activity – is fairly simple to answer. Consider the following remark by Mr DSonic:

> I got bored quite easily, I have a quite short attention span, so immersion in any form of media is very important to me, because – I can watch a film I really love, but can still stick around and take out my phone. So something really can hold my attention that does the stuff for me.

Mr DSonic's remark exemplifies a common practice amongst participants when answering the question 'why do you play videogames', which is drawing comparisons between videogames and traditional media to state that gaming is more fun and enjoyable: videogames serve a similar purpose to other entertainment media, only videogames do it much better. Since the pleasure in engaging with entertainment media is always escapism of some form (Vorderer, et al, 2004), it seems only appropriate to describe the fun of gaming also as escapism. Meanwhile, this remark also raises the question, why is gaming more effective at holding this participant's attention? Consider a more elaborate account on the subject, by Mr ARed, a male British participant:

> One is the escapism, the same reason why I watch a film. It should be entertainment for a couple of hours; I immerse myself in the fictional world created. I want to be entertained. And there is the reason why I play Pokémon, is challenge, this is the competitive scene I like, built around the universe, built around the world that I like and enjoy.
>
> […]
>
> It is also sort of about learning the universe, within the fictional world someone created. Or learning the mechanics and be good at the game, as good as possible. It is all about learning experiences, aside from curiosity.

Here Mr ARed details how the game of make-believe functions. Videogames create digital worlds (Tavinor, 2009; Juul, 2005), invite players to step into those worlds, and take (temporary) residence in them (Calleja, 2011, pp. 135-139). This process, as Mr ARed points out, is

intriguing and pleasurable for three reasons. Firstly, it is a process of learning new things. Gaming is a process of exploration into the game-world, an expedition into the unknown of both representation and rules, as both are initially hidden from players (Genvo, 2009; Juul, 2005, pp. 55-57). More importantly, players remain in control throughout the majority of the process. Mr ARed also notes that, as curiosity drives him into such game-worlds, he learns them through playing with the rules and learns how to be good at these games.

Using Roger Caillois' terms, videogame worlds are an almost perfect blend of *paidia* and *ludus* (2001, c1958), that is, instinctive play and skill-based play, and both, according to Caillois, are pleasurable because they appeal to the most primitive needs: exploration through tinkering with objects, and finding 'diversion and amusement in arbitrary, perpetually reoccurring obstacles' (Caillois, 2001, pp. 28 & 33). Only in videogames are the obstacles – or challenges – far less arbitrary than they are in other types of games (such as in sports or in child's play, which are the focus of Caillois' discussion), because challenges in videogames are increasingly designed to be part of the game-world rather than as something attached to it separately. This combination, according to many participants, turns gaming into an activity that is more capable of maintaining their full attention and providing pleasure and enjoyment than any other media forms. In short, for participants gaming is fun because it is a particularly pleasant escapist activity, and it is so because gaming is interactive, featuring games of make-believe with challenges – or gaming is the epitome of modern autonomous imaginative skill-based hedonism.

Returning to the first observation illustrated in Mr ZHZen's remark: my participants seemed to have very little problem in describing their everyday gaming as a pleasure-seeking escapist activity. Some of them – admittedly very few – even used words such as 'addictive', such as Ms LToad, a female British participant:

> It is fun and addictive. If you play a good game, you just don't wanna go out, you don't wanna deal with the world, in a way, you just want to play the game. It's like you can do things you can't in real life, you can focus on improving at something, build up you skill level, get a better score at *Mario Kart* or something. That is very addictive. I suppose there is a lot variety of games, so, you never get bored.

As mentioned above, such expression was rather common in participants' responses to the question 'why do you play videogames' – over two-thirds of the participants described gaming as an escapist activity in one way or another. I found this rather surprising because the concept of escapism is rather problematic in the context of Media Studies, more so than the

notion of pleasure, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Commonly the term connotes avoiding everyday reality (and everyday problems that requires time and effort to solve) due to laziness or lack of determination or courage (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 128). Moreover, the videogame medium is particularly susceptible to the negative connotations of escapism due to its digital nature and 'gameness':

> As escapist activities removed from reality, they become imbued with triviality and other, usually negative, connotations of escapism. This becomes doubly problematic in the case of digital games where the normative assumption of game/nongame binary are combined with those of the virtual/reality. (Calleja, 2010, p. 343)

To put it bluntly, 'escapism' in the context of gaming is typically connoted negatively, because: 1) playing (games) is often seen as an activity that has no (positive) consequences outside the game-world; and 2) the digital world is usually understood as 'virtual/unreal' and action taken within it also has little impact on the 'real world'. Of course, as Calleja points out, such understandings of escapism (in gaming) is highly debatable (2010, p. 343), and so is using escapism to describe entertainment media in a more general sense (Vorderer, et al, 2004). But the participants' responses nevertheless beg the question: why did they seem to be unconcerned by the negative connotation of describing gaming as escapist activity? Was it because the participants were not aware of the negative connotations in academia, or was there something more going on? This issue would be better examined in tandem with another matter that also surprised me: very few participants, less than 10 out of the 50, specifically listed social activity as part of their motivation for playing.

Platform for Social Interactions

'The social nature of gaming' might seem rather desolate – indeed, as discussed in many previous studies, social interaction was often cited as the main motivation for gaming, within or outside the context of multiplayer-only games (such as MMO games) (Hoffman & Nadelson, 2010; Thornham, 2009; Kuss, et al, 2012; Kowert, 2016; Calleja, 2011). Yet only a relatively small number of my participants referenced social interaction as a motivation for gaming.

A couple of simpler explanations of this departure from existing studies could stem from the participant pool of this study and how the question was asked. The participants were mostly self-selected, and all expressed strong interests in both videogames and this study (see **CHAPTER 2**). Moreover, I presented myself as a dedicated player, who was keen to learn what they thought about their relationships with videogames. As mentioned above, after two hours of

rapport building through gaming-interview sessions, it is possible that the participants were less concerned with justifying their gaming, and more open to telling me about what they thought of the videogame medium, as they were invited to do. Furthermore, my participants did not deny the importance of social interaction in the context of play. All of them talked about gaming with others or talking about gaming with others as part of the reason why they enjoyed their play experiences. However, when explaining why gaming is fun, social interactions did not seem to be as crucial as other factors. I suspect my participants would still select 'social interaction' if surveyed about their motivation for gaming. However, if we were to subscribe to this explanation, this difference between findings of previous studies and the responses of my participants immediately raises a further question: why does social interaction play a notably less important role in making gaming fun? In my view, the question lies in the last characteristic of modern autonomous imaginative hedonism: both gaming and the fun of it is meant to be individualised.

Campbell suggests that the practise of modern autonomous imaginative hedonism is naturally individualised:

> The individual is both actor and audience in his own drama, "his own" in the sense that he constructed it, stars in it, and constitutes the sum total of the audience. (1987, p. 78)

Simply put, the enjoyment of modern autonomous imaginative hedonism is not rooted in interacting with others. In turn, social interactions are not required to allow videogames to function. Rather, I would argue that other players' roles are the same as other digital in-game items: props. It is not to imply players dehumanise other players in gaming, but that players do not see other players apart from in their in-game digital presence. Other players are still part of the player's 'day-dream'. Players play together in multiplayer games to make each other's day-dream more vivid and convincing because, unlike pre-programmed elements, real human players are far more sophisticated and unpredictable. Andmodern videogames are becoming ever more capable of creating vivid day-dreams; other human players' inputs are more often moulded into part of the day-dream but less distinctively as a human presence. This can be seen in the 'like to play with other people' remark made by Ms AOlimar, the female Chinese-British participant, as discussed earlier:

> [**DOTA 2**] is a lot more about teamwork and strategy. And sort of learning the special ability of each character, because you can pick from a quite wide of selections. I like

> playing it because you can play with other people, I like games that you can play with other people while I live on my own as a student.

Her remark also elucidates how multiplayer mode is handled in modern games. Just one generation of console ago – the Xbox, PlayStation 2 and GameCube era – multiplayer was very much something that could only take place in physical proximity. Amongst the three mainstream consoles, only Xbox had a built-in online function. Yet ten years later, the vast majority of multiplayer games do not even require a player to know the other players, as the whole process is handled automatically by algorithms. Take **DOTA 2** mentioned above for example, all a player needs to do to play multiplayer is to login to the game, click a few buttons and wait. Moreover, the buzz-word for the current generation's multiplayer experience is 'seamless', which refers to design that allows a player to just drop-in to another player's game. A good example is the **DARK SOULS** franchise. As long as they are playing online, players can literally 'invade' other players' games to become an enemy, or be 'summoned' by other players to be their allies. In this case, the social interaction is woven into the day-dream.

Handling in-game social interactions in this way has two consequences. Firstly, the day-dream is more coherent and the pleasure derived from it is more consistent. Playing with others (friends or strangers) no longer requires players to interrupt their modern autonomous imaginative skill-based hedonist activity. Secondly, it changes the role of gaming in social interactions around it. The social aspect of gaming takes place outside videogames rather than in games. Social interaction is less about gaming but more about playing with videogames. The idea of playing with videogames as social interactions was discussed earlier in the chapter through examination of Ms SSylvanas and Mr EFez's remarks. A further example can be seen in Ms YFWang, a female Chinese participant's answer to the question 'why do you play videogames?':

> I think a very key aspect of my own gaming is that, it seems that there were always someone playing with me. So I was also having fun interacting with other players while gaming, but not only because of gaming. Because I do not really consider myself as a gaming fanatic, in the sense that, say if a game is very well made, if nobody playing with me, if nobody trying to convince it was worthwhile, I probably would not be playing it – although sometimes I might have already heard of it. But if someone would tell me about it and discuss it with me, I would very likely play it.

It should be noted that Ms YFWang told me that she rarely played multiplayer games. Instead, she primarily played mobile single-player games. In other words, she had very few, if any, in-

game interactions with other players. Rather, the social interactions she talked about were interactions that used gaming experience as 'talk about tokens'. Closer inspection of other participants' remarks, who also highlighted social interaction as why gaming is fun, indicated that they understand social interaction similarly as Ms YFWang, despite playing multiplayer games more frequently. In other words, the participants who regarded social interaction as their motivations for playing games only considered the socialisations that are parallel to, or outside, gaming as aspects of motivations, but not those that take place in-game. In a sense, the participants did not consider themselves drawn to a game because it was 'social'; rather, they brought social activities to the gaming. This practise could be best illustrated in Mr DCRedfield, a male British participant's remarks:

> Cos there is the social interaction in that. That is a fun thing to do with other people. Cos, usually, if in a group, you will find it is hard to find something to do, hard to find something that includes everybody, videogames is an easy thing to do that involves everyone, it doesn't require anyone to leave the social.

Mr DCRedfield's remark indicates that videogames, in this case, are used as a backdrop that parallels social interaction, but not as part of the social interaction. In some sense, it functions as a safety-net: even if someone was not great at maintaining conversations, they could just fall back on playing games. However, according to the participants, such social occasions did not occur often. They played by themselves for the majority of the time. In turn, it suggests that even for participants who highlighted social interactions as their motivation for gaming, playing videogames was still an individual and personal pleasure seeking practice most of the time.

Overall, my participants generally did not consider social interaction as part of their motivations for gaming because modern gaming (around 2015-2016) is simply not designed around social interactions. The type of gaming they experienced in their everyday lives was designed to be interactive modern autonomous imaginative skill-based hedonist activity. I believe this is also one of the two reasons why the majority of participants preferred to describe gaming as escapist activity. The other one is that such activity is more encouraged and less frowned upon now, compared to when the previous studies took place, around a decade ago. Indeed, ten years seem to be barely enough for society to have had a drastic opinion shift as such, but it did nevertheless. It happened because this shift is not an isolated instance, rather, this shift is an outcome of the rise of modern consumerism, which, according to Campbell, has already been taking place across all sections of modern society for decades. In other words,

the increasingly more individualised and personalised design of gaming experiences is not a coincidence, this process is rooted in a broader trend of our modern consumer culture. And how could it not be, when gaming is the perfect embodiment of the spirit of modern consumerism? In turn, videogames could engage players to a level that is unrivalled by any other entertainment medium, at least according to participants such as Mr DWang, a male Chinese participant:

> Gaming is something meaningful to do during free time. Outside the time of working or studying, I do not want to waste my time on TV [reality] shows or [soap] dramas or things as such, unless the TV dramas are some kind of classic or particularly meaningful […] I find watching for the sake of it is a waste of time. In spare time, [I would] either playing a few rounds of basketball with friends or playing games by myself; I find either activities is more meaningful. Also gaming for me is fairly rewarding.

For him, gaming as the highly individualised pleasure seeking activity is just as engaging, rewarding, and most importantly, justified, as physical activity with friends, which is probably the least frowned upon escapist activity one could think of. I argue that such strong legitimisation for gaming – do keep in mind that gaming is still in many ways considered to be trivial and juvenile by the public – could be better understood through the idea that gaming, as a modern autonomous imaginative skill-based hedonist activity, speaks to something that is fundamental in the needs and wants of players, as Campbell argues that this is exactly what modern autonomous imaginative hedonism does (Campbell, 1987). The question of exactly which needs and wants were spoken to is far beyond the scope of this chapter or this study. Nevertheless, the needs and wants are so socio-culturally fundamental to us that participants did not consider fulfilling them through escapism as something requiring justification, and this is why gaming is fun.

Implications: Consumer Capitalism and Individualism

Gaming is the newest and most powerful form of modern autonomous imaginative hedonist activity, and this is why gaming is fun. In turn, modern autonomous imaginative hedonism is what motivated players to play videogames. In order to further understand the nature of the player-videogame relationship, I would like to highlight its implications in three areas: videogame consumption; individualised and personalised gaming; and neoliberal framing of gaming and gaming experiences.

One aspect of the player-videogame relationship that requires better understanding is that of videogame purchase/acquisition, discussed in the last chapter, in particular the culture-

value of pre-orders and back-log purchases. Campbell calls the modern autonomous imaginative hedonism 'the spirit of modern consumerism' (1987, p. 86). By this he is referring to its ability to create endless wants, as he explains:

> Although employing materials from memory, the hedonist can now imaginatively speculate what gratifications and enjoyment are in store, and thus attach his favoured day-dream to this real object of desire. […] The introduction of day-dream into hedonism thus not only strengths desire but helps to make desiring itself a pleasurable activity (1987, p. 86).

In this excerpt, Campbell highlights the processes of desiring, in the sense that the very activity of imagining pleasure is powerful enough to drive consumers to further consumption. He goes on to argue that because pleasure brought about by the actual product is often actually subpar to the imagined pleasure, consumers therefore continue to imagine and continue to seek better pleasures. I argue that the videogame medium makes this process even more vivid and promotes further consumption in two ways. Firstly, the materials that players use to construct day-dreams are not built from memory, but are tangible objects that are digitally real. In turn, the 'object of desire' will also appear to be even more real and obtainable: better equipment for the avatar, higher ranking in multiplayer games, one more achievement or trophy – all these appear to be easily obtainable as long as the player keeps playing. Secondly, if the player determined that the current first layer of day-dream, namely gaming, could not fulfil their desire, they would move on and search for the next one. Players knows how games work as day-dreams, at least in terms of how games would work for them; they know which game will be a better day-dream when they see one, thus they keep buying new games. In turn, the more videogames become the embodiment of modern autonomous imaginative (skill-based) hedonist activity, the more consumption ensues.

This offers a perspective that bridges the cultural-value and use-value of videogame purchase discussed in **CHAPTER 3**. In the case of pre-orders, players are not only paying for the secured possession and earlier ownership, but also paying for the privilege of desiring – knowing the game would arrive on the day of release, the pre-order customers could safely imagine the pleasure it would bring (the use-value), which, as Campbell points out, is a pleasurable activity in itself. This also offers an alternative perspective on why participants tend to pre-order games that are similar to what they usually play, as they could imagine more vividly what the pleasures are in store for them, either through playing a similar game – a previous instalment of the franchise for example – or through simply thinking about it using their memory. The

back-log purchases function in similar ways, as having those games in their possession allows players to comfortably imagine the fun they could have, if only they had the time – as discussed in the last chapter, participants were fully aware of the fact that they would probably never have time to complete games in their back-logs, which in a sense replaces the use-value. This distinctively consumerist cultural-value generates endless needs and wants based on imagined use-value, and drives players to further purchases. Because, the videogame medium is also particularly effective in generating wants and needs for playing more, the videogame industry saw an explosive growth alongside the rise of consumer capitalism, which has the underlying principle that ever-expending production and endless consumption is the sole measurement for prosperity (Lewis, 2013, pp. 15-25), (Schwartz & Sagie, 2000; Hochschild, 2003).

Secondly, gaming is increasingly individualised and personalised because the autonomous imaginative hedonism functions best when only one player is involved. As Campbell points out, one fundamental characteristic of the pleasure brought by the modern autonomous imaginative hedonism is that it is highly individualised and personal in nature:

> Whilst in most cases there is a direct sensory gratification to be gained from the patterned stimuli which the product present, the greater pleasure is likely to be derived from its open invitation to be used as material for illusory enjoyment. Such usage is necessarily covert and individualistic in character and cannot, by its nature, be communal. (1987, p. 92)

Here Campbell points out that the enjoyment of modern autonomous imaginative hedonist activity is personal; more importantly, he points out that, although the material of such imagination (and the 'direct sensory gratification') could be shared, the imagination itself could not. I argue the same could be said about gaming. Indeed, one player could observe another's gaming session and enjoy the 'sensory gratification' of the audio-visual representation, it is simply impossible for the observer to experience the same enjoyment as the one who is playing.

The 'individualistic' and 'covert' nature of the pleasure of gaming and play is important to keep in mind because it is useful for not only understanding players' accounts (as I will demonstrate in later chapters), but also for examining other aspects of videogame culture, such as the videogame industry. This offers an alternative perspective on the increasingly prominent 'individualisation' trend in videogame design talked about by participants. They

observed that the industry made, and was still making, enormous efforts to model videogames into single-user media content. Playing the same game with friends simultaneously on a single console/computer, sometimes known as 'couch co-op play', is more a novelty than the norm in mainstream videogames. Furthermore, some seemingly trivial adjustments also prevent traditional 'hot-seat' multiplayer gaming[24] being carried out: in-game avatars take significantly more time to build; progress in games is ever more important; and 'game over' is increasingly rare.

On the surface, it is just a cynical attempt to make each player buy their own gaming equipment. But I argue it is more about single-player focused design being essential for better realism in the modern autonomous imaginative (skill-based) hedonist activity. On the one hand, it allows designers to devote more resources, both in terms of development time and computational power of a piece of gaming hardware, to creating more vivid game-worlds, thus enhancing the day-dream experience. On the other hand, excluding other players from a single gaming session eliminates interruptions to the day-dream experiences therefore enhances the escapist quality of it. Taken together, one could argue that modern videogames are designed to speak precisely to the individualised and personal nature of modern autonomous imaginative hedonist pleasure. I will expand on the individualised and personalised nature of gaming in greater detail in the next chapter, where I examine the participants' accounts for their everyday gaming activities.

In addition to the two implications discussed above, this notion also enables further examination of the neoliberal framing of videogame and gaming experiences. I will return to this in **CHAPTER 6**.

Conclusion

Motivation for gaming is a subject that has eluded scholars for decades. In this chapter, I tested a player-centric and Audience Studies-inspired alternative to the more common survey or experiment-based psychological approach. This approach sought to examine the players' accounts of their motivation for gaming in its entirety, which in turn helps us to better understand the player-videogame relationship. According to participants, they play video-

[24] Hot-seat multiplayer: multiple players playing on one machine (PC or console), each player take their turn to play. Typically a player's turn ends when their in-game character dies. A classic hot-seat multiplayer game is SUPER MARIO BROS.

games because videogames are fun. Videogames are fun because they offer highly interactive games of make-believe. Taken together, videogames are by-far the most concise embodiment of 'the spirit of modern consumerism': modern autonomous imaginative hedonism. Moreover, by incorporating challenges (that offer a sense of achievement), videogames elevate themselves into modern autonomous imaginative skill-based hedonism. Sacrificing accessibility, it nevertheless turns gaming into the almost-perfect modern (day-dream based) hedonist leisure activity for those who could play, such as the participants. Therefore, although sometimes functioning as a platform for social interaction, gaming for them is an individualised and personalised escapist activity first and foremost.

Chapter 5: Gaming

Introduction

This chapter examines the concept of gaming from the participants' perspective. In the previous chapter, investigation of participants' conceptualisations of 'motivations for gaming' led me to the conclusion that motivations for gaming appear to be rooted in the players' everyday direct engagement with the videogame medium, or gaming. Moreover, as discussed in **CHAPTER 1**, gaming is at the very core of players' engagement with the videogame medium, hence it underpins the player-videogame relationship. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how participants understand everyday gaming.

First I examine the method of gaming-interviews (again) through the lens of stratification that was discussed in **CHAPTER 4**. Although it appears to be an ideal method for investigating gaming, I will demonstrate that, because gaming sessions in gaming-interviews and gaming in everyday life are initiated by different motivations, gaming in gaming-interviews is more useful for investigating how players approach individual gaming sessions rather than investigating the player-videogame relationship in the context of their everyday lives.

With this in mind, I proceed to examine my participants' accounts of their everyday gaming activities. To do this, I introduce the 'flow' model – not the older version that is commonly discussed in the existing literature, but the newer revision. By applying the model to participants' accounts of their gaming session portion of the gaming-interview, I illustrate that, despite its relatively narrow focus on the experience of overcoming challenges, this newer revision of the 'flow' model can help with understanding how players manage their experiences of individual gaming sessions through setting their own goals. Following this, I address the flaws of this model by applying it to the practice of 'grinding'. In doing so, I illustrate that the notion of modern autonomous imaginative hedonism could well complement the 'flow' model to help develop a more comprehensive and nuanced theorisation of the experience of gaming – especially in helping to better understand the strong sense of privacy that could be observed in participants' remarks about their everyday gaming activities.

The chapter concludes with an in-depth examination of the private nature of gaming that was expressed by the participants, especially by those who were in intimate relationships at the time of interview. Drawing on both the notion of modern autonomous imaginative hedonism and the 'flow' model, I illustrate how the combination of 'day-dream' and skill-based interactivity frames gaming into something that is deeply personal.

Gaming as Player-videogame Relationship

In **CHAPTER 1**, by 'gaming' I am referring to players' direct engagement with the videogame medium, namely their in-game play activities. By introducing this concept, I am able to highlight players' engagement with the videogame medium outside of the games, such as videogame purchases in **CHAPTER 3**. This allows me to examine how players understand their relationship with the videogame medium in a broader sense, because, as discussed in **CHAPTERS 1** and **2**, those activities are meaningful for players in their own ways and therefore also play important roles in the player-videogame relationship. Nevertheless, it should be obvious that gaming remains the core of the player-videogame dynamic. My participants acknowledged that they bought videogames because they wanted to play those games. Also, as demonstrated by the participants in the last chapter, their motivation for playing videogames is primarily the highly individualised and personalised enjoyment of gaming. Simply put, this study regards gaming as the central pillar of the player-videogame relationship. Therefore investigating how players understand their direct engagement with the videogame medium is necessary for the purpose of developing a player-centric perspective on the videogame medium. However, because this study also includes gaming-sessions as part of the gaming-interview, the epistemological difference between the participants' remarks on the gaming experience of the gaming session and their remarks on the gaming activities in their every-day lives needs to be understood, and I argue that the concept of stratification is once again a helpful tool. I begin by reviewing the concept of stratification.

Examining Gaming

As introduced in **CHAPTER 4**, in the context of philosophy of science, stratification is a concept developed by critical realists – most notably Roy Bhaskar (2008) and Andrew Collier (1994) – to theorise the relationships amongst the various disciplines that all aim to understand the world in which we live. Referring to each discipline as a stratum (of knowledge), critical realists use the concept of stratification to illustrate the transcendence of knowledge. As demonstrated in the last chapter, even in a context much narrower than 'the entire world' (motivation for gaming as a reflection of the player-videogame relationship), and with primarily common-sense determined disciplines (in-game mechanism, player's in-game actions, and the entire notion of 'fun'), stratification nevertheless enables a better understanding of the relationship between the participants' account of motivation for gaming and their relationship with the videogame medium. I argue that, with some minor adjusts, the concept of stratification will also help us to do the same with the concept of gaming.

Similar to knowledge about motivation for gaming discussed in **CHAPTER 4**, I argue that knowledge about gaming as a reflection of the player-videogame relationship could also be divided into three strata: in-game mechanisms; actual gaming activities; and gaming as an everyday direct engagement with the videogame medium motivated by the goal of 'having fun'. In turn, the three principal relations between strata proposed by Collier (1994, pp. 131-132), still apply in this context: 1) 'Ontological presupposition' (p. 131), whereby the existence of a higher stratum automatically presupposes the existence of the lower stratum: the in-game mechanism allows gaming activities to take place, as in-game activities form the foundation for gaming as everyday engagement[25]; 2) 'Non-transitive vertical explanation' (p. 131), whereby one stratum could explain the higher stratum that is adjacent to it, but not the one further away: the in-game mechanism explains why players play games in certain ways, but it does not explain gaming as an everyday pleasure seeking activity; and 3) 'Composition' (p. 132), whereby a stratum is composed of the stratum that it ontological presupposes: gaming as an everyday pleasure-seeking activity is composed of individual gaming activities, and each in-game activity comprises interactions with the in-game mechanism.

The notion of stratification is important to keep in mind when approaching players' remarks not only because it helps categorise the remarks. The principles, especially 'composition', are crucial in helping to theorise the role of gaming in my participants' everyday lives from their accounts of their individual everyday gaming sessions, because unlike their remarks about their motivations for gaming, which primarily revolve around the notion of 'fun', my participants talked fairly equally about both their everyday gaming sessions and their conceptualisation of everyday gaming. The notion of stratification therefore reminds us how to approach these accounts.

Gaming in Gaming-interviews

This study employed an amended version of the 'gaming-interview' as a data collection method; participants were invited to play a game for approximately 60 minutes immediately preceding their interview. This particular method of gaming-interview proved to be useful in two particular ways. The first way is the more common and is often used in a laboratory

[25] Collier also discussed the possibility of 'co-ontological presupposition', whereby two strata are ontologically dependent on each other. I do not think it applies in the case of the player-videogame relationship – videogames continues to exist regardless of whether they are played; gaming can still happen even if it is not an everyday engagement with the videogame medium motivated by the goal of having fun.

setting, similar to how it is used in psychological studies. The difference is that whilst traditional psychological studies typically use questionnaires and observation to gather data about players' actions and reactions to games being played in the gaming session (see: Tsai et al, 2015; Christou, 2013 Admiraal et al, 2011), the 'gaming-interview' relies on an interview or similar method to obtain more detailed responses directly from the players (see: Daviault, 2012; Hamlen, 2011). This usage has brought insights into how players understand in-game mechanisms and presentations and how they would likely approach them. The second way in which the gaming-interview is useful is less common, that is 'to facilitate a more 'play like' atmosphere and generate questions about […] playing experiences as they occurred' (Schott & Horrell, 2000, p. 40), which I refer to as 'rapport building'. In this case the researcher is relatively less interested in the games being played as they are in the former type of gaming-interview (see: Schott & Horrell, 2000; Shaw, 2013; Shaw, 2014).

As mentioned in **CHAPTER 2**, aside from the more obvious function of rapport building, my intention was also to investigate how participants reflect on the activity of gaming that happened relatively recently. However, I struggled to make connections between their reflections on the gaming session and their remarks about their everyday gaming activity. I believe the reason for this is the difference in motivations for gaming in the gaming-interview and gaming in an everyday context. Gaming sessions in the gaming-interviews were led by the researcher, whereas their everyday gaming activities were motivated by 'fun' –in the last chapter, my participants made it abundantly clear that 'fun' was the reason they chose videogames over other entertainment media as their favoured everyday leisure activity. Referring back to the notion of stratification and the principles of 'ontological presupposition' and 'composition', the higher stratum is only composed of elements of the lower stratum which it ontologically presupposes. Hence if 'gaming in an everyday context' is motivated by 'fun', then it is only composed of, and could be explained by, everyday individual gaming sessions that are also motivated by 'fun'. In turn, examining gaming activities that were not undertaken for this purpose, for example, during the gaming-interview, would not reveal much about how players practice gaming as their everyday leisure activity, as such activities do not transcend towards the higher stratum.

This could be best shown by contrasting typical a gaming-interview with Valerie Walkerdine's (2007) and Helen Thornham's studies (2011), which are, to my knowledge, the only two cases where the gaming sessions in the gaming-interview achieved the goal of revealing players' understandings of gaming as an everyday leisure activity on the third stratum. That is to say,

their gaming-sessions generated data that speak directly to questions about how their participants carried out their gaming activities in everyday contexts. However, it is only possible because both authors employed this method in a distinctively ethnographic fashion. In both cases, the authors videotaped players' everyday gaming as they would naturally happen – in post-school gaming clubs in Walkerdine's case, and in the players' own house in Thornham's case. In other words, the key difference between typical gaming-interviews and Walkerdine's and Thornham's gaming-interviews is that typical gaming-interviews – including mine – induce external motivations for gaming to take place, as participants played because researchers told them to. Using the ethnographic method, Walkerdine and Thornham recorded gaming activities as they happened somewhat naturally – 'somewhat' as the presence of a researcher would always have an impact on the players, because '[players] will always maintain a certain amount of "secrecy" and pleasure no amount of "subaltern" exposure can understand' (Thornham, 2011, p. 159). However, in my view, neither study fundamentally alters the motivation for gaming in the gaming sessions as a typical gaming-interview would.

It is certainly not to say that participants did not find their gaming sessions enjoyable – all participants told me that they had a good time. After all, the games I offered are highly regarded embodiments of the modern autonomous imaginative interactive skill-based hedonism as all good games are; they are enjoyable by nature, regardless of the motivation. Neither am I implying that their remarks did not tell us something about how they understood the activity of gaming and their relationship with the videogame medium. Although their remarks did not address gaming as everyday pleasure-seeking activities, their remarks still delivered insights into how participants understood in-game mechanisms and their in-game activities. To illustrate, Mr PSFisher, a male British participant who chose to play **THE LAST OF US**, said:

> I sort of have the habit of look around while I am playing, cos I am sort of interested in the environment. So I died a couple of times while I was trying to do that. But aside from that, I think the difficulty is relatively easy. I mean, I'm still getting used to the control, what you can do, what you can't. But it still allows you to walk around a bit. Generally for the beginning of a game, it is quite good.

In this remark, Mr PSFisher talked about his preferred style of gaming: 'look around' because he was 'interested in the environment', which speaks to classic game theorist Caillois' concepts of *paidia* and *ludus* (2001, c1958), that is instinctive, exploratory play and skill-based play. On this basis, Mr PSFisher brushed off his in-game deaths as not indicative of the level of challenge this game offers ('the difficulty is relatively easy'). In saying this, he also implied

that these deaths were neither indicative of his gaming skill, since they were not caused by an inability to deal with the challenges but simply because he was interested in 'looking around'. One way to interpret this remark is through the scope of in-game competence and masculinity, as discussed by Walkerdine (2007, pp. 35-40). In my study's terminology, both comments are indicative of the 'interactive day-dream' characteristic of videogames discussed in the last chapter. Finally, Mr PSFisher ended the comment with an overall verdict of 'quite good' for 'the beginning of a game'. This suggests that he rated the game favourably despite not being completely satisfied with it, and that he might have different criteria for different sections of the same game. Both are further evidence for the stratification of motivation for gaming discussed in the last chapter: to this participant, the in-game mechanism was flawed to some extent (he died only because he wanted to 'look around'), but given the context (beginning of a game) and through the actual gaming, he nevertheless found the game to be 'quite good'. His reasoning embodies the argument that a flawed in-game mechanism does not necessarily diminish 'fun' after transcending through the stratum of gaming activity, which resonates strongly with Mr EFez's remark about the notion of 'fun' discussed in **CHAPTER 4**.

Yet, despite the many ways of discussing Mr PSFisher's reflections on his gaming session experiences, the amount that we could deduce from it is still limited regarding how he approaches and understands game-worlds, specifically representation and the rules. His remarks say relatively little about how he saw gaming's role in his everyday life in comparison to his response to the question 'why did you pick this game (**THE LAST OF US**) over others?'

> First of all I never played it before, because I never owned any PlayStation, 3 or 4. I have always been an Xbox gamer, I guess. I never had an opportunity to play. I heard quite a lot about it, like reviews and rewards, something like that. I thought it would be nice to have a play, since have this opportunity. Even though I have a friend who has a [PlayStation] 3, you cannot go around and sit down and play single-players.

Aside from revealing his reasoning for choosing **THE LAST OF US** for his gaming session, the excerpt above provides a number of insights into Mr PSFisher's everyday gaming activities. Firstly, his every-day gaming appeared to be heavily impacted by his gaming platform of choice. This calls back to the discussion about videogame purchase and acquisition discussed in **CHAPTER 3**, whereby access to videogames is not readily available to all players but heavily framed by economic context. Secondly, reluctantly declaring himself an 'Xbox gamer', he desired to know what the games that were not available to him were like. Such desire was also

practised through playing with videogames, as he read reviews and news about a game he would not have an opportunity to play on his particular console. This relates to Campbell's argument that the introduction of day-dream into hedonism does not just amplify the enjoyment, but also makes the act of desire enjoyable, as consumers imagine the pleasures they would enjoy when finally acquiring the objects. Thirdly, playing with a friend's hardware was a social occasion, and social gaming, to him, must involve multiplayer gaming. In turn, this suggests that Mr PSFisher considered modern single-player gaming asocial – in other words (as I will examine in greater details later in this chapter), modern gaming is highly individualised and personalised in nature. Overall, the gaming-session of the gaming-interview was motivated by parallel but ultimately different reasons than a participant's everyday gaming activities. Moreover, as discussed in the last chapter, for players, their relationship with the videogame medium is rooted in their everyday engagement with it. Therefore, I argue that, compared to examining remarks on the gaming-sessions, examining participants' accounts of their everyday gaming activities better serves the purpose of this study.

Again, I am certainly not implying that gaming-sessions as a method could not be fruitful, let alone that they are useless. Rapport building is an invaluable function for any player-centric study – including this one, because gaming is still a stigmatised hedonist activity, which is escapist in nature and hence difficult to talk about. On the other hand, for studies that focus on particular types of gaming experience or a specific in-game mechanism, gaming sessions offer participants first-hand experiences to reflect on during interviews. For example, both Daviault's (2012) study on players' perceptions of certain in-game non-player characters in relation to skill and Juul's (2009) study on players' perceptions of fun in relation to difficulty utilised the gaming-interview method. In both cases, the researchers used gaming-interviews to invite players to reflect on their immediate gaming experiences and drew on their participants' responses to discuss their perception of specific elements in the games played during the gaming sessions (a non-player character in Daviault's study, the enjoyment of the challenge in Juul's). Daviault illustrates that gaming skill plays a notable role in players' perceptions of representational aspects of game-worlds, whereas Juul demonstrates that players whose gaming skill could just meet the difficulty of challenges consider the challenges to be most enjoyable compared to either the players who breezed through the game or the players who struggled more with the game. As the foci of research and the data are perfectly synchronised, both studies yielded fruitful outcomes, especially for the time – academia had just witnessed the rise of player-focused studies that were driven by disciplines that are not psychology (Behrenshausen, 2012). Daviault and Juul masterfully showcased the potential of a

qualitative, socio-cultural focused approach in understanding the role of gaming skill, which is still a largely under-researched topic. In the same vein as these studies', in the next section, I draw together the data collected during gaming sessions to discuss my players' approaches to the skill-based aspect of gaming.

Skill-based Hedonism

In the last chapter I briefly argued that gaming could be understood as modern autonomous imaginative hedonist activity, the hedonist aspect of which is greatly enhanced by video-games' interactive and skill-based nature. In this section I elaborate on this aspect in greater depth. A good example of such enhancement is reflected in Mr BZGuo's account of one type of his everyday gaming activities:

> Say for example I had a bad day, work did not go well, [I] got criticised by my boss. And after coming home after work, [I] would just find a practice dummy in Orgrimmar[26] and beat it up furiously. Just like that, an emotional outlet.

In the excerpt above, Mr BZGuo talked about a particular type of everyday gaming that was motivated by the need for escapism. By entering the game-world of **WORLD OF WARCRAFT**, he was able to escape from the physical world in which he was 'criticised by [his] boss'. Moreover, not only is the game-world convincingly vivid (thanks to the high-fidelity presentation and the presence of other players), it further diverted his attention with interactivity. However, although an MMO game, he did not choose to interact with other players. Amongst the wide range of in-game activities available, Mr BZGuo chose to beat up a practice dummy. On the surface, it was a simple case of projecting his frustration onto the dummy, however I argue that there was more going on if we consider that those practice dummies are meant for dedicated **WORLD OF WARCRAFT** players, because such dummies are somewhat special in the game.

As the name indicates, these dummies are for practice – but not just any practice; they are used by dedicated players to practise skill-based ability-rotations to maximise damage output, healing output, or even threat output. I do not need to go through the details of this set-up, suffice to say that 'beating up a practice dummy' for dedicated player like Mr BZGuo is often a self-imposed challenge play, rather than pure exploration or cathartic release of emotions. As such, 'beating up dummies' involves mobilisation of vast amounts of gaming skill and could

[26] A fictional city in popular MMO game WORLD OF WARCRAFT; the capital city of the Horde faction.

easily last for hours if one was perfecting the skill. Thus this activity not only allows Mr BZGuo to escape into a vivid and interactive game of make-believe, but also to engage with repetitive but nevertheless skill-demanding activities, which function as another avenue for reinstating positive feelings by engaging with skill-based gaming. Indeed, the videogame medium elevated the escapist pleasure [which is innate to all entertainment media (Vorderer, et al, 2004)] through incorporating a skill-based interactive system. In the following section, I examine this aspect of gaming and demonstrate that on the one hand it diversifies the pleasure of modern autonomous imaginative hedonism, and on the other also greatly furthers the already highly individualist nature of that pleasure. To do this I first discuss why skill-based play is enjoyable using the model of 'flow'.

'Flow'

The model of 'flow' developed by Csikszentmihalyi (2008, c1990) is probably one of the most often used theoretical models in discussing the skill-based nature of gaming (Jin, 2011, p. 115; Laffan, et al, 2016, p. 545). At its core, the 'flow' model is a way of understanding the process through which skill-based activity, such as sports or art-creation, could lead to immense enjoyment and immersive experience (Sherry, 2004, p. 332; Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, c1997, p. 29). But before moving on to why and how it is used in investigating gaming experiences, I should note that there are two fundamentally different iterations of the 'flow' model. Although both are proposed by Csikszentmihalyi, the newer and revised iteration has several notable changes comparing to the older one. The key change to note here is not the visibly more nuanced categorisation of experiences, but the metrics. In the revised version, both the 'challenge level' and 'skill level' are measured through perception and self-perception, whereas in the older version both are considered as objectively observable matters. This change, in my view, is what makes the current 'flow' theory a useful tool to understand the experience of gaming for this project, as it complements 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' by addressing the skill-based aspect of gaming experiences. I unpack this argument in this section, starting with a closer look at the two iterations of the 'flow' model.

The First 'Flow'

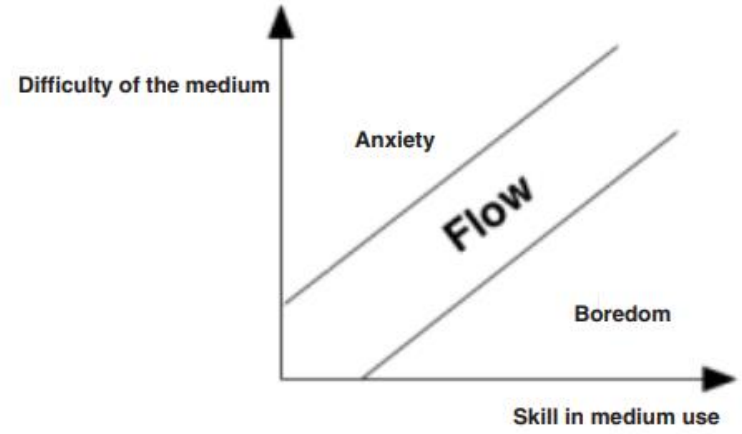

FIGURE 1: OLDER VERSION OF THE 'FLOW' MODEL (SHERRY, 2004, P. 332)

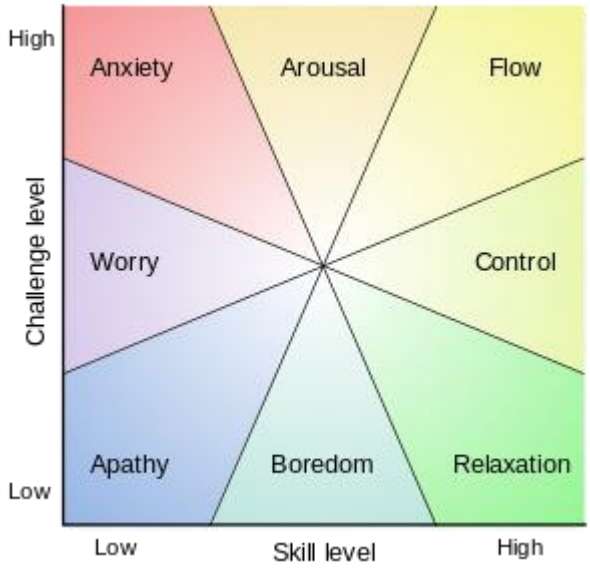

FIGURE 2: NEWER VERSION OF THE 'FLOW' MODEL (CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, 2008, C1997, P. 31)

As mentioned above, the (older version of) the 'flow' model is often discussed in scholarly works about gaming experiences, from theoretical (see: Juul, 2005, pp. 112-115; Juul, 2013, p. 5; Sherry, 2004) to empirical (see: Admiraal et al, 2011; Jin, 2011; Laffan et al, 2016; Tsai et al, 2015; Zhou, 2013). The 'flow' model suggests that, when engaging with skill-based activities, if the skill matches the challenge – whereby one's skills 'are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, c1997, p. 30) – it invokes the state of flow. In this state, a person is completely immersed in the activity being

performed, where nothing else but the task itself matters, and even time ceases to exist for the player (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, c1997, p. 34). Additionally, Csikszentmihalyi also outlined further conditions in which the skill-based activity would more likely invoke the experience of flow: 1) 'a clear set of goals', which could only be achieved with skill-based activities; and 2) 'immediate feedback' being constantly provided to the person who is engaging with said skill-based activities (2008, c1997, p. 29). It should be noted that what is described above is the core notion of the 'flow' model, which remains the same between the two iterations.

In this regard, the reason for using the 'flow' model to investigate gaming, for the researchers, is relatively straightforward: as discussed in **CHAPTER 1**, videogames not only provide players with clear goals to work towards through skill-based engagement, they also provide constant and immediate visual-audio feedback to players based on their in-game performance. Additionally, videogames, especially modern ones, also provide players with digitally real interactive environments to either experience the game designers' imagination or realise their own. Indeed, as Sherry points out, 'Video games possess ideal characteristics to create and maintain flow' (Sherry, 2004, p. 336).

However, as often as the 'flow' model is used, its flaws are also revealed. Most notably, this older iteration of the 'flow' model was criticised for its rigid trichotomy of the experience. As shown in the visualisation, this iteration of the 'flow' model suggests that if the player could not find a balance between skill and challenge, the skill-based activity will cause anxiety in the case of the under-skilled, and boredom in the case of the over-skilled (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 90, cited in: Sherry, 2004, p. 332). As Juul points out, this does not explain why players would keep playing difficult games despite failing to overcome challenges (2013, p. 5), nor does it explain why players often play games with relatively low levels of challenge (2005, pp. 112-115). Additionally, other empirical studies also point out that flow as a concept lacks nuance. For example, Jennetta et al's study demonstrates that the 'immersive experience' of gaming is not always induced by 'flow', although it is often described in similar terms (2008, p. 657). In a similarly vein, Laffan et al's study indicates that entering the state of 'flow' has a weak association with 'happiness' (2016, p. 547). Simply put, being able to enter the state of 'flow' is not the only reason why gaming is fun. In a sense, these findings echo my participants' conceptualisation of fun as motivation for gaming, whereby the skill-based sense of achievement was not articulated by them as the main reason that they play videogames.

In my view, arguably the most fundamental flaw of the older iteration of the 'flow' model is how it defines challenge and skill. Generally speaking, it is understood that this iteration of the 'flow' model sees the 'challenge level' and 'skill level' as objectively observable matter (Sherry, 2004, p. 332). In the context of gaming, this conceptualisation implies that researchers could monitor a player's gaming session in action and make an objective assessment about how hard the game is and how high the player's skill level is, and thereupon determine whether the player was in flow, anxious, or bored. Or, at the very least, the researcher would be able to gain some insight into the observed gaming experiences. However, to my knowledge, the vast majority of empirical studies that discuss the 'flow' model rely entirely on self-reporting as the sole means of measuring participants' 'flow' experiences (for example: Admiraal et al, 2011; Jin, 2011; Tsai et al, 2015; Chang et al, 2017; Weibel et al, 2008).

While the reasons for relying on self-reporting to measure the 'flow' experience are rarely discussed, it appears to stem from the static and contrived way through which the older iteration of the 'flow' model defines challenge and skill, as mentioned above. In the context of gaming, it forces researchers to assign a value to the videogame challenge and gaming skill observed. But this is not possible, because there is simply no such universal metric that can objectively measure either activity reliably. As discussed in **CHAPTER 1**, modern videogames are not static mental puzzles that consistently challenge one particular, definable skill set; rather, a range of different abilities are required (Juul, 2005, pp. 106-112; Juul, 2009; Genvo, 2009). This means that gaming skill is composed of a variety of different abilities. The sheer complexity of both videogame challenge and gaming skill makes measuring them through observation of live gaming practically impossible. Moreover, modern videogames typically allow players to tackle the same challenge in many different ways, meaning a given section of a videogame could result in a different challenge level due to the different approaches taken by the players. Simply put, to determine challenge-to-skill ratio only by observing a gaming session can be very difficult. In my view, this is why empirical studies have resorted to measuring it through self-reporting. To my knowledge, the vast majority of literature on the 'flow' model discusses this older iteration of the model.

In the context of investigating the skill-based aspect of gaming experience, a model that is built to theorise experience of skill-based activities can actually only address a rather narrow aspect of moment-to-moment gaming experiences, nor does it offer researchers any reliable way of theorising 'skill' or 'challenge'. Both flaws render the older iteration of the 'flow' model and existing discussion about it particularly unfit for the purpose of my project, as this study aims to use both the notion of gaming and that of gaming skill to investigate the player-

videogame relationship beyond moment-to-moment gaming, and in their everyday lives. This aim demands an approach that can not only more comprehensively account for the skill-based aspect of gaming, but also viably account for the notion of gaming skill. Therefore, I turn to the revised 'flow' model.

The Second 'Flow'

A revision of the 'flow' model was presented by Csikszentmihalyi in his 2008 edition of **FINDING FLOW: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ENGAGEMENT WITH EVERYDAY LIFE** (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, c1997, p. 31)[27]. In contrast to the older version discussed above, the revision of the 'flow' theory (see Figure 2) redefines both challenge level and skill level as based on self-perception. In other words, the challenge level and skill level are not determined by observation, but by how the person engaging with the task perceives them – whether they think the challenge level is high, mid, or low; whether they think their skill level is high, mid, or low. Depending on the rationale between perceived challenge and the perceived skill, the skill-based, goal-oriented activity could result in the performer entering eight different emotional and cognitive states. With this shift in measuring challenge-level and skill-level, the newer version of the 'flow' model introduces five new states in addition to the existing 'anxiety', 'boredom' and 'flow', with the 'flow' being the 'optimal experience' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, c1997, p. 33). It points out that some states other than 'flow' described in this model, such as arousal, control, or relaxation – although not as 'optimal' as 'flow' –could still be enjoyable (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, c1997, p. 32).

Take state control for example: according to this revised model, the condition for triggering the state is that the person perceives the challenge as not-too-easy but also not-too-difficult, and perceives themselves to be performing at the peak skill level – they are not just overcoming those challenges, they are overcoming them efficiently with a great performance. Under such conditions (as seen at the middle-right of Figure 2), the player will be able to enter a mental state of 'control', in which they would feel that although the challenge is not trivial, they perceive their skill level as nevertheless more than sufficient to overcome it, as long as they were paying appropriate attention to it – in short, they would feel in control. And since they are not in the state of flow, they could maintain a certain level of awareness of their surroundings.

[27] He does not state why and how this revision came to be in the volume.

Thus this newer iteration of the 'flow' model addresses both main flaws of its older iteration discussed above. Defining both challenge level and skill level through self-perception is what makes the revised 'flow' model a very helpful tool for this study, because it not only circumvents the problem with objectively assessing the videogame challenge and gaming skill through observation, it also enables a more dynamic and player-centric approach to understand different types of gaming experience more comprehensively, without just focusing on one narrow aspect of it (flow). Observations made about the gaming sessions of some participants will help demonstrate this concept.

Eight participants decided to play **DARK SOULS 2** for their respective gaming sessions. Although not all had played a game from this franchise before, they all told me that they had a fairly clear general idea about the game and knew its reputation for being extremely challenging, particularly in the sense that the player avatar would usually suffer many deaths in-game. Amongst the eight participants, two were very experienced and well-practiced in the game, whereas the other six participants had never played it before. Both of the more experienced participants, Mr LJason and Mr JDante, appeared to be relatively more skilled *in the game* than the other six participants who played **DARK SOULS 2** in their gaming sessions. I am not implying that the two named participants were more skilled players in general, (see **CHAPTERS 1** and **6**), as gaming skill could not be measured through one universal metric in disregard of the specific context. Rather, this assessment is based on a combination of observation of the gaming sessions, the participants' own reflections on the gaming sessions during interview, and my own relatively extensive experience and knowledge of the **DARK SOULS** franchise. The fact that I am only comfortable making such a claim when all three different revenues of information about the game and their experiences were available speaks volumes about the difficulty in objectively measure a player's gaming skill.

Nevertheless, regardless of their previous experiences with the game, all eight participants were told to start from the very beginning of the game. Referring back to the older iteration of the 'flow' model discussed above, if we were to believe that challenge and skill are static, the assumptions would be that the experienced and more skilled players would probably be bored because the beginning section of the game is the easiest, whereas those who never played the game before would likely experience much more anxiety during the 60 minutes of gaming. Neither of the predictions turned out to be quite true.

Even just playing the easiest section of the game, neither Mr LJason nor Mr JDante seemed to be bored, and both set their own goals and played the game in very specific ways. Mr

LJason picked the weakest starting class with the intention of defeating the second boss within the 60 minutes given by exploiting a very specific glitch. To do so, he only engaged with enemies when absolutely necessary and intentionally avoided other enemies as much as possible. By the 60 minute mark, he had successfully achieved his goal, albeit with some bumps along the way – including 10 minutes of trying to make the glitch work. Mr JDante, on the other hand, picked his favourite starting class and played through the section of the game as intended – however at an extremely fast pace. By the end of the 60 minute gaming session he had managed to defeat the first boss with relative ease – which usually happens around the 2-3 hour mark. His avatar also died fewer than five times throughout the process.

It is clear that both participants were setting personal goals for themselves, goals that were intentionally different from what was intended by the designers, in the sense that their goals greatly heightened the level of challenge. This practice indicates that both participants seemed to think the challenge level of this game section in its intended form was too low for them. More importantly, if they had played the gaming as intended, they would not have been able to play it with their actual skill levels, because there would not be room for them to visibly demonstrate their skills – imagine doing a first-grader's maths homework, no matter how good a person is at mathematics, they would not be able to demonstrate this ability by doing one-digit addition. As such, doing so would lead to the combination of low-challenge and low-skill, which in turn could lead to 'apathy'. Instead, they chose to play the game in ways that were unintended by the designers, so that they not only intensified the challenge, but also created more room for themselves to demonstrate their skills at a higher level. Thus they avoided the low-challenge and low-skill scenario. Although neither player had the flow experience – we were still having conversations while they were playing, as they were keen on explaining to me what their plans were and the key strategies involved, they clearly did not lost sense of their surroundings – neither participant appeared to be apathetic or bored.

On the other hand, the six participants who had never played the game before seemed to have very different goals. None were eager to fight or even find a boss, and all occasionally asked me for directions. Noticeably, all of them experienced the constant death of the character(s) they were controlling. Nevertheless, none of the six seemed worried or anxious during their gaming sessions, and most importantly, all six participants suggested that they were enjoying the experience. Later, during the interview, they told me that they only had the goal of familiarising themselves with the game, and they all expected their avatars to die many times over before mastering the game. By intentionally adjusting their goals, the challenges were perceived as much less daunting since they were not pressuring themselves to make

any progress, whereas the many deaths of their avatars were not perceived as indications of low-skills. As such, their experiences during the gaming sessions fit in the general area of mid-high challenge/mid skill. By setting their own goals, they set up different references for their own perceptions of the challenge-to-skill ratio, which in turn created pleasant gaming experiences for themselves, even though they had never played the game before, and indeed experienced many failures while trying to overcome the challenges.

The discussion above demonstrates that the newer iteration of the 'flow' model helps us to understand how both the experienced and the less experienced participants were able to enjoy their gaming session with this highly challenging game by setting up their own goals. This practice is a direct contrast to how the older iteration of the 'flow' model is interpreted in existing literature (discussed above), which typically understand the goals for gaming as being predetermined by the games and therefore static. However, my participants indicated that not only are goals not static, but players can actually have a large amount of control over what goal they play towards in individual gaming sessions. Furthermore, the newer iteration of the 'flow' model helps us to understand the purpose and outcome of 'setting up own goals for gaming': this is a way to adjust their (self-) perception of gaming skill and challenge, which in turn provides players with control over which emotional state to enter during gaming[28].

Indeed, 'setting up own goals' is known to be a common practice amongst players; for example, Jenkins discussed it as 'self-imposed challenge' (1998, p. 271), as did Paker (2008). However, what this newer iteration of the 'flow' model helps to do is to understand not only the outcome, but the mechanism behind such a practice. Understanding the mechanism of such a process is crucial for my study because, as I demonstrate in the next section, according to my participants, they often took advantage of the mechanism to moderate their everyday gaming experiences. Hence a better understanding of how and why players set their own goals for individual gaming sessions will help to better understand how players approach gaming in the everyday context and take control over their everyday gaming experiences (as per the 'composition' principle discussed in the last section). Only by understanding this concept can discussion of its implications on the player-videogame relationship begin – I return to this later in the chapter. The newer iteration of the 'flow' model is able to help with this

[28] It should be noted that players are able to do this because gaming is a skill-based activity, which in turn means that the framing of gaming skill as a concept can have an impact on how much flexibility players have in the process of setting up their own goal. There are cases in which players' control over goal-setting is greatly limited by the innate framing of gaming skill provided by specific videogames. I will discuss this topic in greater depth in the next chapter.

concept because by reframing skill and challenge as (self-) perception, as well as expanding its scope beyond the 'flow', it can be utilised in discussions about the skill-based aspect of gaming experiences in a much broader context, as I demonstrate in the next section.

Flow in Practice

As mentioned above, according to the revised 'flow' model, the state of 'flow' is not the only one that can provide positive experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, c1997, p. 33). Moreover, as enjoyable as the state of 'flow' is, completely losing sense of one's surroundings (even the sense of time), is not always desirable (Laffan, et al, 2016, p. 545), because the 'flow' state is as taxing as it is enjoyable, taking a large amount of effort and time to setup and maintain. Not to mention that, according to Figure 2, aiming for the state of 'flow' also increases the risk of falling into even more mentally demanding states such as arousal and anxiety, also explored in previous empirical studies (Laffan et al, 2016). In turn, one could intentionally choose challenges of lower difficulty and adjusting personal goals accordingly to avoid entering the state of 'flow' if preferred. Almost all participants mentioned such practice; Mr YQLiu's, a male Chinese participant, gave the most nuanced account of it:

> Mr YQLiu: Sometimes I do not want to spend too much time on gaming. I believe videogames should purely for entertainment […] I cannot accept that when it becomes too taxing, job-like. So this sometimes also plays a role in my choices for games. Sometimes I think mobile games [are] very relaxing, [also they] do not take a lot of time. […] But I also dislike them for the exact same reason.
>
> Interviewer: [Why?]
>
> Mr YQLiu: I was once very obsessed with those simple games, play [them] whenever [I] had time. But one day suddenly I realised that, why I should waste all my time on those games? These [type of games] are really retarded! This is probably also why [I am] playing the [more complicated mobile] games that [I have been] playing recently; there are still elements of strategic [thinking]. [To actively engage with a] thinking [process] is still better than stupid tile-matching. So one day I just uninstalled them all.

In this excerpt, Mr YQLiu detailed a process of adjusting the challenge-to-skill ratio back-and-forth for his preferred gaming experience. While he clearly enjoyed more engaging gaming experiences, the time and effort that was required to maintain them was sometimes too much for him to justify for an activity that he considered 'purely for entertainment'. As enjoyable as the 'flow' experience is, setting it up and maintaining it is both demanding and

risky – or in Mr YQLiu's words: 'taxing' and 'job-like'. As such, he turned to tile-matching mobile games, which he considered to be relatively easier. While playing games with proper goal setting could provide him with relaxing gaming experiences, such activity is also prone to becoming 'boredom' when he no longer perceived the ways he was playing those games as skilful. It is not to say that his skill in playing these games deteriorated, rather that he did not perceive such gaming activities to be skilful any more. As he grew accustomed to the games, what was once considered to be skilful play became mundane hence no longer skilful – because it was something he could do without much effort. On the other hand, the challenges would also seem less difficult to him. Therefore, I argue that because Mr YQLiu perceived the challenge-level and his own skill-level gradually becoming less impressive as he continued playing, his initially positive experiences with those games (probably somewhere between 'control' and 'relaxation') gradually turned into 'boredom' or even 'apathy' – or in his own words, a waste of time.

Aside from the above described more general manipulation of experiences over a longer period of time, participants revealed that they also often seek to manipulate their experience of individual gaming sessions through the same method of game choices, especially when relaxation was the purpose of the gaming session being carried out. For example, Mr Apart 34, a male Emirian who was studying at the University of Leeds at the time of interview, told me:

> I would play a game – if I have one hour or anything, I would just take my PSP, play a random **DRAGON BALL Z** battle and that is it. Sometimes it is what I do when I go to the… before training, I will just do that, or before a lecture start, I will just do that. Nothing that I get too much involved in, in a sense, it is a good pastime.

Although also playing games in a more invested fashion, he described three specific gaming scenarios in which gaming was not carried out for the purpose of relaxation. In order to avoid 'get[ing] too […] involved', he would intentionally choose to play a game that he considered to be relatively easy and repetitive (as he mentioned elsewhere during the interview). By doing so, he carefully created a gaming session that was less mentally engaging in comparison to his other typical gaming sessions, but nevertheless interesting enough to occupy him to be 'a good pastime'. Interview data indicated gaming scenarios similar to that discussed above were practised similarly across all demographics, both female and male, Chinese and Western. Participants mentioned that they would often play games during short periods of waiting. For example, Mr DCRedfield would do so while waiting for an appointment; Ms

HNDuan would play a mobile game while waiting for food to be fully cooked; Ms SLiang often played games while communing on public transportation. Under such circumstances, the state of 'flow' is probably not the most ideal state for a player – losing sense of their surroundings might result in unfavourable outcomes, such as missing an appointment, burning food, or failing to get off at the right stop. As such, the 'flow' theory helps us to understand how players implement gaming into their everyday lives in ways that are not intended for a fully-fledged escapism experience.

As discussed in **CHAPTER 4**, for a player, gaming is not an individual, isolated occurrence. Instead, similar to an audience's everyday media use, gaming is part of a player's everyday life. And exactly as Audience Studies has pointed out, as part of their everyday life, it is the audience, but not the content of a medium product, that decides how it will be used and what kind of experience this media use will yield (Silverstone, 1999, p. 10). However, because gaming is also a uniquely skill-based activity, while traditional media use is not, we need a framework to address this aspect of the gaming activity. I argue what the newer version of the 'flow' model helps us to address is exactly the skill-based aspect of gaming. It reveals that players set up their individual gaming sessions by adjusting their own goals for their gaming activities. In doing so, they moderate their own perceptions of challenge-levels and skill-levels. This allows them to facilitate their preferred gaming experiences, because it is their own perceptions of the challenge-levels and skill-levels, not that measured by observation, that determines what kind of experiences the skill-based aspect of the gaming will entail for the players. Overall, this further illustrates the above argued stratification of knowledge about gaming: the game and the experience of an individual gaming session are two separate strata. Although the stratum of an individual gaming session is ontologically dependant on the stratum of videogames, it only partially explains the experience of an individual gaming session. Hence although the challenges and the required skill-sets (demanded by the rule-systems) are indeed determined by the games being played, they do not dictate the players' experiences.

The notion of stratification, in turn, addresses one criticism of the 'flow' model that prevails through both iterations, which is that the 'flow' model only explains the skill-based aspect of the experience of gaming, but does not take the representational aspect into consideration (Nitsche, 2008, pp. 204-205), therefore it is not always useful for explaining the player-videogame relationship (such as aspects of motivation or fun) (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al, 2013, pp. 167-168). For example, it neither explains why players would keep on playing difficult games despite failing to overcome challenges (Juul, 2013, p. 5), nor does it explain why players often

play games with a relatively low level of challenges (Juul, 2005, pp. 112-115). In my view, despite accurately pointing out the flaws, this criticism is somewhat misplaced, because the 'flow' model is not designed to analyse how one experiences the representational aspect of skill-based activities. The skill-based activity, which it is geared towards, is an element of the stratum of gaming experience of an individual gaming session. And because it is only intended to addresses aspects of the middle stratum (an individual gaming session), knowledge generated by the 'flow' model does not naturally convert to the higher stratum, which is knowledge about the player-videogame relationship in an everyday context. Instead, it would require an analytical process (such as the preceding discussion) that transcends the knowledge generated by applying the 'flow' model to individual gaming sessions, in order to speak to the higher stratum.

In short, the 'flow' model only speaks to the skill-based aspect of moment-to-moment gaming experiences, but is not meant to be a 'be-all-and-end-all' solution for understanding the gaming experience or the player-videogame relationship and should not be used as one. Not only would it require analytical processes to transcend the knowledge generated by the 'flow' model between strata, it also needs to be employed in tandem with other frameworks that could address other aspects of the gaming experience (Nitsche, 2008, p. 204). In this study, I pair it with the notion of 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism', discussed in the last chapter. I believe this notion can synergise well with the 'flow' model to help us better understand the player-videogame relationship from a player-centric perspective. I will demonstrate this synergy with the example of 'grinding'.

The Case of Grinding

'Grinding' as a gaming term refers to the practice of repeating one relatively simple, short, and easy-to-complete task over-and-over again for the reward – doing so quickly accumulates in-game resources (such as currency, crafting materials, or character experience points) (see: Wired, 2008; Kotaku, 2018). Some players abhor grinding, while others embrace it (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 132), but very few players claim grinding is enjoyable (King & Delfabbro, 2009; King, et al, 2010) – claiming grinding to be a fun practice is such a novel concept that it warranted a 'featured article' on Wired.com and Kotaku.com. Almost half of my participants mentioned grinding or similar practices during the interview, and none of them considered it to be 'fun' on its own. For example, a female Chinese participant, Ms JTDing, mentioned that she used to deal with grinding as follows:

> I think the most extravagant case [of grinding] was with one of the **WIND FANTASY** games, [because] this game has a broken level-up system. I remember […] once I [had to] 'grind' for the end of the game, I changed all the music files in the game to English audio books or other music that I actually like, then I went on to 'grind' for levels.

'Grinding' for levels was so boring that she had to find ways of engaging herself with other entertainment methods, to prevent herself from being bored. With the newer version of the 'flow' model, we can easily see why this happens. On the one hand, a simple and short task itself is by definition low on the challenge-level – that is what makes it easy-to-complete. On the other hand, the goal of grinding is to simply obtain the reward, which is as bare-bones an in-game goal as a player could achieve. This combination does not create (much) room for a player to exercise high-skill gaming, hence the player perceives both the challenge-level and skill-level as relatively low. This low-challenge and low-skill combination places the experience of grinding in a state of apathy (boredom at best).

In this analysis, the 'flow' model points out that the boring nature of grinding does not solely stem from the simple and repetitive nature of these easy tasks, because a player could still turn simple and repetitive gaming into a fun experience – if they set up a goal that would create room for them to play it with a higher level of skill. This is probably why some players – albeit rarely – claim grinding can be fun. For the majority of players, the combination of simple, repetitive tasks and a simplistic goal turns grinding into something that is simply not engaging. The question is, then, why do players keep doing it regardless of the unenjoyable experience? Some scholars claim it to be a symptom of 'addiction' that is akin to the compulsion of playing slot machines (King & Delfabbro, 2009; King, et al, 2010, p. 268). They argue that this is because players themselves have reported this process as being 'boring', where the rewards players get by the end seem to amount to nothing of value. In this view, the process of grinding parallels gambling on slot machines because, on the one hand, both take a large amount of resource to maintain – monetary in gambling, time and effort in grinding – and on the other, both processes are only fuelled by the hope of reward finally appearing if they keep playing long enough, because in the end there simply would not be any worthwhile reward in a longrun.

Needless to say, such sweeping claims can be dangerous, as they promote vague and arguably mundane criteria for diagnosing serious mental health issues that have led to problematic gaming (Ferguson, 2007; Aarseth, et al, 2017; Bean, et al, 2017). There is a wealth of literature that criticises this approach, and I do not seek to repeat these arguments. Regardless, this

avenue of thought is still deeply flawed, as it narrowly focuses on the challenge-reward mechanism, but completely overlooks all other aspects of gaming that are interweaved with this mechanism. In turn, it misunderstands why players 'grind'. I argue that the framework of 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' can help to understand why players 'grind', despite accepting that grinding itself is not fun.

A Modern Autonomous Imaginative Hedonist Interpretation

CHAPTER 4 argues that one unique feature of the videogame medium is that it provides two layers of day-dream. The first layer of day-dream is the activity of gaming itself, and because it takes place in the game-world, this layer of day-dream is not illusory, as other entertainment media provide, but digitally real. This layer of day-dream, I argue, is unique to the videogame medium. In other words, this layer of day-dream is not accounted for in the original modern autonomous imaginative hedonism framework proposed by Campbell. The second layer of day-dream is similar to what Campbell discussed in his work (Campbell, 1987, p. 78) and is constructed upon a player's memory. However, because the material for the second layer of day-dream is derived from the first layer, which is digitally real, the second layer is more vivid and compelling than the typically illusory day-dream enabled by traditional entertainment media. In this second layer of day-dream, players can imagine not only what they would do in the fictional worlds of videogames, they also imagine – arguably more often, as discussed in Calleja's work (2011) – how they would play the game next time around. In short, the second layer of day-dream is often day-dreaming about the first-layer of day-dream. Moreover, Campbell argues that the unique characteristic of modern autonomous imaginative hedonism is that it converts the very activity of desiring – anticipatory day-dreams – equally enjoyable as the very hedonist activity itself, if not more so (1987, p. 86). In the case of gaming, this suggests that the activity of imagining the fun of a future gaming session, the second layer of the day-dream, is just as pleasurable – if not more pleasurable so – than gaming itself, the first layer of the day-dream.

Going back to the case of grinding, it is often suggested that while the goal for an individual grinding session is obtaining the reward provided by the segment of game, the long-term goal is to accumulate in-game resource (King & Delfabbro, 2009; King, et al, 2010, p. 268; Mäyrä, 2009, p. 132). However, what is less appreciated is that accumulating in-game resource itself serves a larger purpose, which is to acquire certain in-game digital items to be used in future gaming sessions. The newer 'flow' model indicates that low challenge-level and low skill-level activity enables the state of 'apathy', where very little effort or concentra-

tion is required (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, c1997, p. 33). This suggests that, while grinding, players could be easily engaging with the second layer of day-dream – imagining what they would do when they had obtained sufficient in-game resources to acquire the digital items, and subsequently imagining what they would do with these digital items. In turn, although grinding does not provide much pleasure on its own, it enables what Campbell argues to be the most enjoyable part of when people engage with autonomous imaginative hedonist activity: desiring, which I argue to be the second layer of day-dream of gaming. Arguably, because of the low concentration required for grinding, such day-dreams could be carried out alongside the grinding practice. Returning to Ms JTDing's earlier remarks, she also said:

> But I do not particularly mind repetition, because I am more interested [in] how the story will develop after that, or other reward I can get from doing all that.

Knowing how the stories develop mattered because she cared deeply about the fictional world, and its character made up her first layer of the day-dreams that she greatly enjoyed – as she told me later, the two things she cares most about in a videogame are 'audio-visual aesthetics and story'. In this sense, the final reward that she obtained by putting up with the apathy or boredom of grinding is not at all arbitrary to her; on the contrary, such rewards are exactly what motivated her to play videogames in the first place. In other words, she was not grinding for level or in-game rewards. Instead, she was grinding for the 'fun' of gaming.

By combining the newer 'flow' model and the framework of 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism', we reveal the reason why grinding is practiced by many players – including about half of my participants – even though the skill-based aspect of grinding only offers unengrossing experiences. The fun of grinding is not in boringly overcoming underwhelming challenges or the in-game rewards that this process provides, but in imagining where this grinding will lead: for example the aesthetic improvement by putting the item on their in-game avatars; overcoming hard challenges with high skill-level performance enabled by better in-game items; or even simply how the stories in the first layer of the day-dream will play out. The fun provided by the second layer of day-dream could be so compelling that it offsets the innate 'boring-ness' of grinding, eventually making grinding bearable. In this sense, the reason why players 'grind' is modern autonomous imaginative hedonism, and by extension modern consumerism, because such hedonism is 'the spirit of modern consumerism' (Campbell, 1987). If we were to claim that 'pathological grinding behaviours' existed, then what was pathological about them should be determined by how often or how long the player practiced it in relation to a range of other known indicators for mental health issues (Bean, et al,

2017; Ferguson, et al, 2011), not simply because a shallow and deeply flawed observation approach misunderstands the motivation for it – especially considering that the essence of such motivation – consumerism – underlines almost all entertainment goods consumed in modern capitalist society (Campbell, 1987; Lewis, 2013)[29].

Before moving on to conclude the discussion about the newer 'flow' model, I would like to address three more points regarding grinding. Firstly, it is noteworthy that the fun of day-dreaming does not erase the 'boring-ness' of grinding, it only creates a sort of 'tug-a-war' situation. In turn, grinding could become unbearable for a player, if they determine the fun of the second layer of day-dreams was not enough to justify enduring the 'boring-ness'. This is the exact reason Mr EFez highlighted for not engaging with grinding (although he did not use terms such as 'fun' and 'reward' in the same way as I do in this study):

> A game you grind through, they are not fun, but they can be enjoyable in some other ways. But I, at least now, prefer to play a fun game for a short period of time, than grinding through a lots of game, just to get to the gold nugget at the end of game, which is reward.

In this remark, Mr EFez clearly indicated that, while fully appreciating that fun drives grinding, he did not think this kind of fun was what he sought in the activity of gaming at the time of interview. Instead of enduring the 'boring-ness' of grinding for the pleasure of desiring (the second layer of day-dream), he preferred to enjoy the experience of gaming itself (the first layer of day-dream).

This also elucidates the second point, which is that grinding is commonly mentioned but does not seem to be commonly practised. About half of the participants said that they practised grinding, while over half made no mention of grinding behaviour at all; also those who mentioned it – including Ms JTDing, who did not 'mind repetition' – indicated that grinding in general was a rare occurrence in their everyday gaming, since as much as it could be justified, it is still considered 'boring'. This is probably because, thirdly, not all low challenge level and low skill level gaming sessions are boring – even when it they are repetitive. **CHAPTERS 1** and **4** demonstrate that videogames are organic combinations of skill-based gameplay systems

[29] Nor can it be claimed that modern capital consumerism is pathological in its entirety. Indeed, I imagine that it is an argument that many scholars – myself included – would be more than eager to make. However I do not think that this is the intention of advocates for pathologising gaming.

and audio-visual representations (Nitsche, 2008; Juul, 2005). Clever design, for example creative interactivity and intriguing games of make-believe, could still create interesting (first layer of) day-dreams to compensate the apathy or boredom resulting from low challenge level, low skill level repetitive gaming. Participants did not refer to these situations as grinding probably because such experiences were simply not 'boring'. Consideration of how to make grinding intrinsically fun on a design-level is beyond the scope of this study.

Lastly, I should note that the above discussed activity – repeatedly playing a low challenge section in a videogame to accumulate resources – only accounts for part of the activities that my participants referred to as grinding. Some of my participants also used grinding to describe the activity of 'repeatedly playing and failing at a difficult section of videogame to develop their gaming skill'. While similar explanations could be applied to this type of grinding, I argue there are more nuances to it, but since this type of grinding is centred on the notion of gaming skill, I will discuss it in the next chapter. For now, I turn to discussion of the implication of the synergy between the newer iteration of the 'flow' model and the notion of modern autonomous imaginative hedonism.

Flowing Day-dreams

Through the case study of grinding, I demonstrated that the newer version of the 'flow' model in combination with the modern autonomous imaginative hedonism framework could help theoretical examination of the player-videogame relationship as reflected in the participants' accounts of their everyday gaming. Firstly, participants demonstrated that their experiences of the skill-based aspect of gaming was determined by their own perceptions of the challenge-level and their own perceptions of the skill-level they executed during gaming. More importantly, both perceptions were largely contingent on the goals they set for themselves. In turn, participants often actively adjusted their goals for individual gaming sessions to moderate their experiences of the skill-based aspect of gaming. Secondly, participants indicated that while modern autonomous imaginative hedonism is what makes gaming fun for them, because the skill-based aspect of gaming plays an important role in framing how mentally engaged they were during the gaming process. This characteristic not only plays a role in participants' choice of games, but is also the key with which participants manage gaming activities in their everyday lives. Most noticeably, they would intentionally choose less difficult game to play for short, less mentally engaging gaming sessions that acted as intervals between other non-leisure activities. Lastly, this duo of theoretical frameworks reveals that how players engage with skill-based aspects of gaming is informed by the challenge-reward mechanism, but not determined by it. Participants indicated that they first evaluate what the

experiences of overcoming these challenges would yield in terms of both the experience of doing it (the first layer of day-dream) and those activities' contributing to the second layer of day-dream. They would then decide when, where, and how they would carry out their gaming activities. This calls back to the individualised and personalised nature of the gaming experience raised in **CHAPTER 3**. In turn, this brings insights into why the gaming activity, for the participants, was private and personal – I elaborate on this in the next section.

Private Gaming

Generally speaking, participants described gaming as a rather personal and private activity. A good example of this was made by Mr DWang, a male Chinese participant. When commenting on the advantages and disadvantages of home-consoles and laptops, Mr DWang said:

> But home-consoles are not very convenient; I have to play mine in the kitchen [common room in student accommodation]; whereas gaming on PC [laptop] could be more private, as I could play it in my own room.

Although this remark was prompted by questions about the advantages and disadvantages of certain gaming hardware, it is more notable for the everyday gaming activities being described. What concerned Mr DWang about these gaming platforms was not just their technical prowess, but also the spaces they placed him in, as well as the privacy implications such spaces connote. As the Xbox One required a space bigger than his own (student) room to set up, he had no choice but to play it in the common room (where the communal kitchen is also located). For him, such spatial requirements practically turned his console gaming into a semi-public activity, which he was clearly not very fond of. The quote above shows that gaming is something that Mr DWang holds very dear, as he preferred to play videogames in a more private space, not to be on display in front of others.

In fact, gaming to him was so private, that he only liked sharing the experience with his girlfriend to a limited extent. In a conversation after the interview, he revealed that he had not yet told his girlfriend about his Xbox One purchase. Moreover, for his 12 month degree programme, he also intentionally booked accommodation in a different property than his girlfriend, so that he could have more freedom and privacy when it came to gaming. He also believed that his girlfriend would not be very supportive of his decision of purchasing a fairly expensive piece of gaming hardware. He also briefly touched upon this topic during interview:

> My girlfriend is not very supportive of me playing videogames. She could be browsing some internet shops [and pondering what to buy] and watch some nonsensical internet-celebrity videos, [yet] she is not supportive of me gaming.

Gender might seem to be the more obvious angle for discussing this issue. Building on feminist media studies and broader feminist theories, there is a large body of literature on the gender dynamic in the context of everyday gaming practice, for example in relation to domestic interactions and narration of pleasure and technology (Thornham, 2008; Thornham, 2011), in relation to masculinity and femininity (Walkerdine, 2007), in relation to self-identification (Shaw, 2014; Shaw, 2011), among others. In this discussion I focus on the sense of privacy that was expressed by participants in their accounts of their everyday gaming activity because the notion of 'the freedom of gaming in private' was a recurring theme throughout the interviews, mentioned by both female and male participants. Although I started this discussion with a remark by a male participant, this sense of 'different meaning-makings of gaming activity' was also discussed by female participants who were in relationships, as I shown below. I also did not know much about participants' everyday gaming practices, and they were not the focus of the interviews because it is not in the scope of this study. My interest, and subsequently the focus of this discussion, is in understanding how my participants make sense of gaming in the context of their everyday lives, not how they practice their everyday gaming. Based on existing literature, it would be easy to predict that the ways in which players deal with the individualised and personalised nature of gaming in their everyday lives would be gendered, however I do not have enough data to initiate a proper discussion from this perspective. With that in mind, I shall return to the discussion.

On the surface, the mild disappointment Mr DWang expressed concerned the difficulty in justifying his everyday gaming. However I argue that this probably is not an entirely accurate interpretation in this case, for a simple reason: his girlfriend also participated in the study: Ms XLYong. This means that she not only identified as a player herself, but was also interested in gaming enough to volunteer as a participant. In fact, she introduced Mr DWang to me (while volunteering as a participant) as 'someone you might want to interview as well'. Furthermore, during her interview, she expressed a rather positive view of gaming, which was almost the exact opposite of what Mr DWang described. Thus I have every reason to believe that Ms XLYong understood the passion for gaming very well – but probably not in the same way that Mr DWang understood it.

Returning to a remark made by Mr DWang in the last chapter, in which he talked about his motivation for gaming:

> Gaming is something meaningful to do during free time. Outside the time of working or studying, I do not want to waste my time on TV [reality] shows or [soap] dramas or things as such, unless the TV dramas are some kind of classic or particularly meaningful […] I find watching for the sake of it is a waste of time. In spare time, [I would] either playing a few rounds of basketball with friends or playing games by myself; I find either activities is more meaningful. Also gaming for me is fairly rewarding.

He strongly emphasised that gaming for him is a 'meaningful' activity, not like some 'time-wasting' activities, as he saw it, such as TV drama – in China, soap dramas or realities shows, as anywhere else in the world, are thought to be amongst the 'meaningless' forms of entertainment media (Rong, 2008; Ang, 1996). He also compared gaming to playing sports with friends, which is arguably the least frowned upon, 'meaningful' entertainment activity. Ms XLYong did not seem to share her boyfriend's view:

> Nowadays, [I] play games only because I am bored, just to kill some time. Although [I] cannot say [I] never ever play a game for the sake of it, just want to go into a game, playing for the sake of playing.

Here we can observe a salient difference between how Mr DWang and Ms XLYong understood the activity of gaming. Mr DWang assigned high personal value to the activity of gaming, rating it far above usual 'time-wasters', whilst Ms XLYong did not see gaming as different from other types of 'time killer'. In Ms XLYong's words, we could say that Mr DWang chose to play videogames 'for the sake of playing', which she rarely did. Without in-depth knowledge of their relationship, I would argue that here lies the root of his perception of his girlfriend not being 'supportive' of his gaming hobby: the (arguably rather accurate) perception that his girlfriend did not see gaming as meaningful and as fun as he did. This did not seem to be an uncommon attitude. For example, Mr DSonic, a married male British law firm worker, one of the relatively older participants (in comparison to the majority of the participants in their early- or mid-20s), told me something very similar:

> My wife, she does not consider herself as a gamer, but she always play games on her phone. You probably play more games on the phone than I play on my PS4, and you are saying… I am supposed to be the gamer.

Similar to Mr DWang's girlfriend, Mr DSonic's wife was a player after all, albeit played primarily mobile games. Setting aside Mr DSonic's account that his wife played more often than him, in Mr DSonic's view, his wife suggested that he had more passion and dedication for gaming than she did, despite investing less time in gaming than her. And since his wife did not see herself as a 'gamer', as implied in his remark, Mr DSonic's account expressed a sentiment that is very similar to that of Mr DWang's remark regarding the perception that his partner did not see gaming as meaningful and as fun as he did. Also similar to Mr DWang, Mr DSonic went to great lengths to ensure his gaming activity was as private as possible, primarily revolving around taking advantage of his wife's work schedule:

> Normally I get home 10 past 5, my wife has to commute, so she typically won't get home until 7, so I will play game for an hour or two. […] or my wife goes out of town with her friends for the weekend, I will sort of… yeah, also, twice a month, my wife has to work on a Saturday; when she does, I will actually make an effort to get up, like 8 o'clock, have some breakfast, and devote a whole day to play.

The more obvious connection to make from both male participants' efforts in keeping their gaming activities private is the notion of 'problematic pleasure' discussed in **CHAPTER 4**. The pleasure from using entertainment media is problematic because it is seen as unreal, insignificant and distracting by the 'cultural police' – critics, mainstream news, politicians, and others (Silverstone, 1999, p. 48). And the pleasure from gaming is doubly so – Thornham refers it to as a 'guilty pleasure' (2011, p. 157). In her view, one way to understand the 'guilty' aspect of the pleasure of gaming is that it requires adults to take 'time out' of their adult lives to derive pleasure from activity that is considered to be culturally childish and juvenile.

Moreover, Thornham suggests that such guilt is even harder for male players to reconcile with, because deriving pleasure from entertainment media culturally connotes a diminishing of masculinity (2011, p. 157). Unlike the 'culture police' in Silverstone's metaphor, who only show up occasionally in public media, male players are in close contact with their partners on a daily basis. When their partners do not share their passion and devotion to the videogame medium this makes justifying their everyday gaming activity a difficult and exhausting task. Hence it is often easier for players to confine their gaming activities to a more private space. In turn, if they had to play games in front of their partners, they would need to negotiate. Mr DSonic gave an example:

> See, my wife don't have a problem with me playing games, when I am playing a game, she will just get out her laptop and watch a film whilst me doing it. But, what is quite

> good is, because of [the location of] her work, she gets back home later, that means she never sees me playing on PlayStation. And when she is in, that is a good bargaining tool, because when I say, I want to play on my PlayStation for a few hours, and she goes "aww…" I was like, "when was the last time you even saw me playing a game", so…

In this excerpt, Mr DSonic described a scenario he used to negotiate with his wife regarding the justification of his gaming activity. Although noting that his wife does not have a problem with him playing games, this remark indicates that Mr DSonic believed that his wife did not think gaming was something worth investing hours of time in. Mr DSonic's response tried to match her views by arguing that he simply did not play as often as she thought, hence he was not as drawn to the pleasure of gaming as she thought. At this point, one might wonder why the videogame player would rather go through all this trouble to play, instead of just introducing their partner to the fun of gaming. According to my participants, it is because the fun of gaming is highly personal and private, as I will turn to now.

One might say that both of these male participants underestimated their partners' ability to enjoy gaming in the same way they did, as the mainstream gaming culture tends to do (Carr, 2005). To reiterate, I am not discussing participants' ways of approaching their everyday gaming in the context of their intimate relationships, because it is not the focus of this study. The purpose of this discussion is to examine the player-videogame relationship that is reflected in their accounts of their everyday gaming activities. I argue that the player-videogame dynamic reflected here relates to participants' perceptions of the pleasures of gaming as being highly personal and private. The fact that they found explaining the pleasure of gaming to their partner to be difficult speaks to how private they perceived their gaming activity is. I also argue that their concerns were not entirely based on the stereotypes of the 'girl gamer', but also on the grounds that the pleasure they derived from gaming was highly individualised and personalised by themselves through their understanding of their own desires. The private nature is best reflected in what Mr DSonic said early in the interview:

> I much prefer to be on my own. I actually do not much like – I prefer to be on my own in the house, even when my wife is doing something else, I find that quite annoying. [We both laughed]

This remark is noteworthy because he seemed to be suggesting that gaming in private was not only about the difficulty of justifying his preferred way of deriving pleasure, but that he fundamentally did not enjoy the presence of other people while he was gaming. The highly

private nature of gaming expressed here could also be found in other participants' remarks – other participants who in general did not worry about justify gaming to their partners, because their partners were just as passionate and devoted to gaming as they were. A female British participant, Ms BHawke, had a rather typical response to the question, 'do you play games with your boyfriend?':

> Not often. Cos he will play the same role [in the **LEAGUE OF LEGENDS**]. Because we both play support, so there might be not too much to play with. And we get quite competitive with each other.

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS is very similar to **DOTA 2**, mentioned in the last chapter. It is a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game that features 5 versus 5 combat. In other words, one would imagine it is a good set-up for Ms BHawke to play together with her boyfriend. Yet apparently neither Ms BHawke nor her boyfriend were willing to compromise their personal preference and/or individualisation of their gaming experience by playing another class of character for the sake of playing together. In fact, according to her, they did not seem to even enjoy each other's digital presence. Instead, they preferred to talk about games and gaming:

> Yeah, [we talking about videogames] quite a lot. Yeah. I think that is because one of our main interests, we can just sort of talk about it, we can just sort of go… we can talk about games that we got on different platforms [such as **MORTAL KOMBAT X**].

Calling back to **CHAPTER 4**, another female British participant, Ms SSylvanas, gave an almost identical answer on the topic of 'playing with her partner'. Although few female participants disclosed their relationship status, those who did all expressed similar preferences for using play and gaming as a backdrop for out-of-game socialisation with their partners rather than playing together. More notably, they indicated that the talk was about videogames, but not about gaming. In other words, gaming for them was just as private as it was for Mr DWang and Mr DSonic, even though these female participants expressed no concerns about justifying gaming to their partners, since their partners were also dedicated and passionate players as they were. This also calls back to the discussion about motivation for gaming in the last chapter. The participants indicated that videogames were played as a backdrop for social interactions, but not for in-game social functions. Again, this is not to say that players do not play together, they often do – sometimes voluntarily, sometimes in forced situations. In the next chapter, I discuss how different temporality and spatiality of gaming frames the player-videogame relationship, through the lens of skill. For now, I focus on the private nature of

gaming experience expressed by my participants. I argue that the notion of 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism', when combined with the newer iteration of the 'flow' model, can help better understand why.

Private Pleasure

As established in the last chapter, gaming was participants' preferred leisure activity because it provides them with games of make-believe featuring skill-based interactivity; for them, gaming is a particularly effective form of escapism. I argued that gaming is a particularly appealing and powerful form of escapism because it not only near-perfectly embodies what Campbell refers to as 'the spirit of modern consumerism' – modern autonomous imaginative hedonism (Campbell, 1987, pp. 88-95) – but also elevates it to the next level by introducing a new layer of day-dream that is less a dream but a digitally real imaginative experience. The videogame medium achieves this by providing digitally real interactive objects in place of imaginary ones, and uses those interactive objects to create challenges that serve to further vivify the day-dreams while generating pleasure of its own (sense of achievement).

Therein lie the reasons, in my view, for why Mr DSonic preferred to negotiate time and space for gaming rather than trying to demonstrate the pleasure of gaming. Firstly, the pleasure one could derive from modern autonomous imaginative hedonist 'day-dreams' is distinctly personal, as Campbell points out:

> Whilst in in most cases there is a direct sensory gratification to be gained from the patterned stimuli which the product presents, the greater pleasure is likely to be derived from its open invitation to be used as material for illusory enjoyment. Such usage is necessarily covert and individualistic in character and cannot, by its nature, be communal. (1987, p. 92)

Here Campbell reminds us that the pleasure of such modern hedonist activity does not just derive from audio-visual experiences, but more greatly from manipulating those materials to realise the 'day-dream' discussed earlier in the thesis. As he correctly points out, the greater pleasure of a day-dream is only accessible to the 'day-dreamer'. In the case of gaming, while the aesthetic pleasure of the audio-visual representation could indeed be shared, the pleasure of mobilising the digitally real items to realise the first layer of day-dream could only be enjoyed by the player. Indeed, unlike the process discussed above by Campbell, gaming still allows the process of digital objects to be interacted with but not in a purely imaginary sense, yet the pleasure of it is still very similar in its essence – because it is the player's day-dream, it is nevertheless deeply rooted in their desires, needs and wants, which is not only exclusive

to the player, but also not something they always want to share – that is if such private matters could be shared in the first place. This underlines the personalised and individualised nature of players' experiences of engaging with videogames and digitally real games of make-believe.

Secondly, the discussion about the newer iteration of the 'flow' model in previous sections also indicates how this experience is further personalised and individualised by the skill-based aspect of gaming. I argue that it functions on two different levels. The first level is relatively straightforward: as discussed above, the experience yielded by the process of overcoming challenge is determined by how a player perceives the challenge-level in relation to how they perceive the skill-level being executed during the process, whilst both are adjusted by the goal they set for themselves. Perception of challenge-level, self-perception of skill-level, and personal goals are all by definition only known to the player. My participants also indicated that the preference for particular goal-setting and specific ways of achieving it are also developed through their often decades-long gaming experiences. All such elements contribute to highly personalised and individualised experiences of the skill-based aspect of gaming.

Thirdly and most importantly, gaming is personal and private because it is also a process of confronting one's own flaws and inadequacies. Campbell argues that the 'search for pleasure [through modern autonomous imaginative hedonism] may itself lead to the generation of guilt' (1987, p. 215), because the 'day-dreams' are 'the constructed ideal' that would often trigger self-reflexive thoughts, which often highlight the flaws in 'the experienced reality' (1987, p. 215). Therefore the 'day-dream' of modern autonomous imaginative hedonism, to him, is as demoralising as it is pleasurable. Moreover, Campbell argues that the ways in which such starkly contrasting emotions are reconciled is through the 'image of self as "virtuous"', by which he means the understanding that being virtuous is to 'transcend concern with the self, or at least involves some subordination of self to a higher goal' (1987, p. 215). In other words, for modern autonomous imaginative hedonism, the very process of reflecting on one's flaws through 'day-dreaming' is virtuous in its own right. Therefore, he argues that 'day-dream' is the endless cycle whereby 'a desire for pleasure develops into a genuine concern for ideals, and ethical impulses "degenerate" into mere narcissism' (1987, p. 216). Simply put, to Campbell, modern pleasure-seeking activities always centre on the image of self – 'day-dreaming' about a better self through reflection on the flawed self.

Whilst Campbell transcends this conceptualisation to a higher stratum to illustrate the inherent connection between modern consumerism and romanticism (Campbell, 1987, p. 216), I highlight this process for two reasons. On the one hand, the more obvious side, this mix of emotion further explains why such a 'day-dream' is private by nature. Not only is the 'day-dream' driven by personal desires, it is also a process of highly personal reflection so that the 'day-dream' can be carried out in a way that speaks to personal desires. Building on this, I argue that this process is arguably heightened in the case of gaming. Videogames provide players with digitally real and interactive materials for players to play with in the first-layer of 'day-dream', which also results in a more vivid second-layer of the modern autonomous imaginative hedonist 'day-dream', and a more vivid 'day-dream' will no doubt further intensify the emotional aspect of this already highly personal experience. Therefore all of these personal preferences and emotions are fed into a process that Gordon Calleja describes as 'double-axis incorporation': 'players incorporate the game environment into their consciousness while simultaneously being incorporated into through avatar into that environment' (2011, p. 169). What this process creates is a mesh between the digital real and the physical real, the mind and reality; a mesh that is saturated with the player's most personal feelings and desires – simply put, a mesh that is private.

The second reason I argue that the private nature of process is heightened in gaming is because the skill-based aspect is also a process of confronting personal flaws and inadequacies with endless cycles that greatly resembles what Campbell argues about the 'day-dream'. As discussed in **CHAPTER 1**, gaming consists of many cycles of inputting commands, receiving feedback, adjusting approaches, inputting command, and so on. Most importantly, it involves reflecting on failures – large or small, gaming ending mistakes or just missing a jump (Juul, 2013, p. 7) – and such failure is also the game's way of calling out players as 'inadequate' (Juul, 2013, p. 7). Arguably, this reflection will happen more often if a player is seeking a 'flow' like gaming experience, which according to my participants is the type of gaming experience they would always try to achieve if circumstances allowed. The 'flow' model indicates that such gaming experience is evoked by a state in which the player can barely manage the challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, c1997, p. 33), which means walking on the edge of failure and success. Since all my participants suggested that a 'flow' like experience was indeed the type of everyday gaming experience they were looking for, they would not only experience many failures in their everyday gaming, but they would also often be reminded of, and forced to reflect on, their own inadequacies in terms of gaming skill. This process is also always centred on self, as it involves figuring out a way to play better by reflecting on in-game activities that

have led to failures. And since this process is almost a parallel to that of 'day-dream' described by Campbell, it is not difficult to argue that this skill-based aspect of gaming also contributes to the personal and private nature of gaming as an everyday leisure activity, which was clearly articulated by my participants.

However, a distinct difference should be noted between the two types of flaws and inadequacies. Unlike the personal flaws and inadequacies in physical reality identified in 'day-dream' as discussed in Campbell's work, the flaws and inadequacies of gaming skill could be relatively easily compensated through practice (Juul, 2013, p. 60). As I will discuss in **CHAPTER 6**, my participants also indicated that the sense of empowerment through developing gaming and gaming skill is an integral component of their everyday gaming experience. In the next chapter, I illustrate that the skill-based aspect of the 'day-dreams' of modern gaming was talked about by my participants through distinctly neoliberal framings, which would eventually help provide a better understanding of the 'paradox' I briefly mentioned in **CHAPTER 4**, which is that overcoming challenges in videogames was the most talked about aspect when my participants were remarking on their everyday gaming experiences, yet the 'sense of achievement' was rarely cited by them regarding why gaming was fun.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I began by examining the notion of gaming. In this study, I define gaming as a player's direct engagement with the videogame medium – the in-game activities. I argue that the three strata stratification also applies to the notion of gaming: 1) the gaming activities provoked by game-worlds; 2) gaming activities in individual gaming sessions; and 3) gaming as one concept in-and-of itself in the context of a player's everyday life. On this basis, I argued that gaming sessions in gaming-interview are more useful for understanding the middle stratum, but less useful in explaining the third stratum. This is because the gaming in gaming-interviews is motivated by an entirely different reason than the gaming sessions in a player's everyday life. Whilst gaming in gaming-interview is directed by researchers, gaming in everyday life is carried out for fun.

Further, I examined the skill-based aspect of gaming. Although the participants did not enlist a 'sense of achievement' from overcoming challenges as their main motivation for gaming, interview data nevertheless suggested that the skill-based aspect of gaming played an important role in how they approached gaming in their everyday lives. I argued that the newer version of the 'flow' model is useful for understand it and took a closer look at this particular

version of the 'flow' model. By applying it to the observation that both less and more experienced players appeared to enjoy a notoriously difficult game during their gaming sessions, I argued that it has two major improvements over the older 'flow' model that made it relevant for this study. On the one hand, it defines both challenge-level and skill-level as (self-) perceptions instead of objectively observable facts. On the other hand, it emphasises that both are adjusted based on the goal set by the player themselves. Both characteristics of the gaming experience are important to note, because the participants indicated that, although being fully absorbed in the game of make-believe was enjoyable, it could also be taxing mentally and physically. Also sometimes they would prefer not to be fully absorbed, because they would prefer to maintain a certain awareness of their surroundings. Drawing on the newer version of the 'flow' model, I explored the ways through which participants managed their everyday gaming activity: through carefully adjusting the skill-challenge ratio, as well as setting up proper goals.

Following that, I discussed the case of 'grinding'. Referring to repeatedly playing through a relatively easy section of a game for reward, grinding is often seen as 'boring' by players, including my participants. Scholars struggle to find a way to explain why players often 'grind' regardless, sometimes even claiming it to be symptomatic of pathological gaming. By combining both the modern autonomous imaginative hedonism framework and the 'flow' model, I argued that the enjoyment of grinding lies beyond the activity and the game, but in the 'day-dream' described by the modern autonomous imaginative hedonism framework. Simply put, grinding is enjoyable because it offers player an avenue for day-dreaming about the fun and pleasure of future gaming sessions that are enabled by the grinding, be that new story development, new in-game items, or reaching a higher level.

With that in mind, I returned to the individualised and personalised nature of gaming raised in the previous chapter. In particular, I focused on two cases presented by participants in which they went to great lengths to ensure their gaming activity remained private, away from their partners. I argued that there was a two-folded reason for this. The first was that their partner did not share the same passion and devotion for gaming as they did. This different understanding of the activity of gaming calls back the notion of 'problematic pleasure' discussed in **CHAPTER 4**. The second is more implicit, as reflected in my participants' accounts about the fact that even dedicated player couples typically did not play the same game at the same time. I argued that the private nature of gaming is rooted in the nature of gaming as both modern autonomous imaginative hedonism (day-dream) and skill-based activity. This combination turns gaming into an activity that acts out a player's most intimate feelings and

desires simultaneously in the digital realm and the physical realm, in the mind and the reality, and this is why gaming is private.

Chapter 6: Gaming Skill

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss my participants' remarks on the notion of gaming skill. Amongst the three key concepts of this project, skill is the least academically developed in comparison to motivation (for gaming) and play. That is not to say there is a lack of literature on the topic, but the concept has been relatively under appreciated. I begin by examining the industry's attempts to measure player's gaming skill with single universal metrics, such as 'Gamer Score' by Microsoft or 'Player Level' by Sony. I will demonstrate that such systems actually measure levels of engagement, namely the time and effort a player invests in playing games, but not actual gaming skill.

I then revisit the stratification model, demonstrating that, as the model has proven in the previous two chapters, it can also help to better understand the participants' conceptualisation of gaming skill. On the first stratum (deducing the role of gaming skill through analysing videogame content), I first examine the seemingly conflicting views on gaming skill expressed by the participants: they argued that gaming skill is important but not necessary for gaming. I argue that this could be understood through examining the neoliberal framing of videogames, especially single-player games: videogames are presented journeys to realise the 'autarkic human self' through reflexivity. On the second stratum (theorising the role of gaming skill through analysing actual moment-to-moment gaming experience), I problematize the common practice of approaching gaming skill as an indicator on the scale between 'good' and 'bad', assigned by researchers or self-identified by players. My participants indicated that gaming skill for them is more complicated that just being 'good' or 'bad', and that the impact gaming skill has on the gaming experience differs depending on the games being played, most notably between single-player games and multiplayer games. On the third stratum (gaming skill in the context of everyday gaming activity), I focus on examining the noticeably prominent notion of gaming skill in Chinese participants' remarks on this topic. In doing so, I demonstrate that a player's conceptualisation of gaming skill is deeply rooted in the context of their everyday gaming activity – where, when, how and why they play, as well as whom they play with.

Taken together, drawing on the stratification model, I demonstrate that the participants' seemingly conflicting remarks on the notion of gaming skill are actually not conflicting at all. Rather, they indicate a sophisticated, multi-layered, nuanced and personal way through

which players conceptualise the notion of gaming skill that is rooted in their everyday gaming activities, and reflects the equally sophisticated, multi-layered, nuanced and personal player-videogame relationship that is also rooted in their everyday gaming activities.

Understanding Skills as Self-perception

Overall, I suggest that what is understand as gaming skill should be seen as a context specific, fluid concept rather than a universal metric that is (for example) seen as a player's score. In saying this, it is worth noting the ubiquity of the idea of skill as a metric. The most prominent pan-genre gaming skill measurements are metrics that are provided by the industry. Microsoft uses an 'Achievement – Gamerscore' system[30] to quantify 'skills'. A Sony equivalent is 'Trophies – Trophy-level' system[31], whereby the greater the Gamerscore or Trophy-level is, the more skilled a player is. However a closer look at the descriptions of these metrics reveals that neither system addresses the diverse, context dependent nature of gaming skills. A player could boost their Gamerscore or Trophy-level by simply obtaining as many easily obtainable achievements or trophies instead of tackling more challenging ones. Typically a playthrough (regardless of difficulty setting) will unlock at least a third, often half, of the achievements or trophies in one videogame. Also, due to the fact that the achievements or trophies are defined by game designers rather than players, some games offer a great number of achievement scores or trophies without respective challenges – a quick internet search will reveal numerous guides on how to boost Gamerscore or Trophy-level with those types of games. On that note, what those systems actual reflect is the level of engagement (and a player's skills in toying with the system) rather than what I consider gaming *skills*. As such, one could argue that such metrics are designed to encourage more consumption, which is conveyed by their claim of 'measuring skills'.

How gaming skills should be conceptualised without being measured? Csikszentmihalyi's more recent revision of his flow theory (1997) points towards 'perceived skills' (p. 30). In the last chapter I demonstrated that gaming skills, as players' own conceptualisations of their abilities in overcoming challenges, enable us to capture the complexity and fluidity of gaming activity. As shown in **CHAPTER 5**, the gaming skills that matter to players are not the 'objective attributes' discussed above, but what players believe they possess. In this chapter, I further

[30] For details see: http://support.xbox.com/en-US/xbox-one/games/achievements-and-challenges, last accessed 15/03/18.
[31] For details see: http://faq.en.playstation.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/9869/session/L3RpbWUvMTQxNTExNTQ5Mi9zaWQvSVo0V1BBNm0%3D, last accessed 15/03/18.

illustrate that this allows us to understand that skills are only selectively important to players – in games which players determine are skill-based. For example, videogames are capable of delivering compelling narratives; 'playing for the story' is one of the few speculations about motivation for play that has proven to be plausible by empirical evidence and theoretical discussions (Daviault, 2012; Sherry, et al, 2006). In such cases, gaming skills are arguably less important in shaping play and the motivation for it – this is not to say that gaming skills do not matter under such circumstances. Strictly speaking players still need to rely on their gaming skills to overcome challenges to progress the stories. This indicates that the framing of the kinds of experience a game offers could have an impact on player's conceptualisation of gaming skill. I explore this notion further in later sections of this chapter.

Overall, this chapter follows what has already been argued in the last chapter about how I understand gaming skill – that it is a player's conceptualisation and self-perception of gaming skill, rather than an 'objective attribute', that anchors play and plays a role in shaping motivation for play (and vice-versa). Approaching gaming skills as self-perception instead of an objective matter – although such an approach does not help to develop a definition for gaming skill itself – allows me to more insightfully explore how players understand this notion of gaming skills and how such understandings relate to their play and motivation for play.

Stratification (Third Time)

In the last two chapters, I discussed the notion of stratification (Collier, 1994, p. 131). I demonstrated that it could help to better understand the relationships between the three ways we – as both players and academia – approach the concept of motivation (fun) and the concept of gaming: analysing the content of videogames to deduce why/how players play them; investigating the process of gaming to find out why/how players play in a particular way; and addressing the concept itself in the context of everyday gaming activity. Following the stratification model, I have allocated each approach its own stratum. The stratification model indicates that although different strata can explain each other, they do not replace each other. The three principles identified by the stratification model are: 'ontological presupposition', 'non-transitive vertical explanation' and 'composition' (Collier, 1994, pp. 131-132). The further one stratum is from another, the less they can explain each other. I argue that this model still applies in the present discussion. Similarly to how we understand motivation for gaming and the activity of gaming, the notion of gaming skill is also often discussed from three different angles: 1) deducing the required skill by analysing videogame content and how it alters the representational aspect; 2) analysing gaming skill involved in individual

gaming sessions and its impact on how the player experiences it; and 3) approaching it as a concept of its own in the context of everyday gaming activity.

Amongst the three strata, the three principles still apply. In terms of 'ontological presupposition', gaming skill would not have an impact on the actual gaming experience if it was not demanded by the videogame content, and gaming skill would not play a role in a player's everyday gaming activity if it had no impact on how they experienced an individual gaming session. In terms of 'non-transitive vertical explanation', knowing what kind of gaming skill a videogame – or videogames – demands does not immediately alert us to the role such gaming skill would play in a player's everyday gaming activity, since we do not know how they would deal with the skill requirement in actual gaming. Conversely, and for the same reason, how a player conceptualises gaming skill in the context of their everyday gaming activity does not bring insight into what kind of gaming skill their preferred videogames demand. I will discuss this 'non-transitive vertical explanation' in greater depth later. In terms of 'composition', gaming skill used in individual gaming sessions is always composed of the gaming skill that is demanded by the videogame, whereas the concept of gaming skill that plays a role in a player's everyday gaming activity is always composed of both. I will firstly discuss each stratum in relation to popular videogame culture, in relation to my participants' remarks on the concept of 'skill', and more importantly, in relation to existing literature.

Stratum One

The first stratum – deducting required skill by analysing content – is most commonly seen in non-academic discussions about skills initiated by players, game designers, and popular media content about videogames. Players engage with this stratum most commonly though a 'strategy guide' or 'walkthrough'. Both are designed to illustrate the gaming skill that is required to overcome specific challenges through in-depth analyses of in-game challenges (Newman, 2009). Game designers engage with this stratum typically through discussions about the design of challenges and the skill-based activity it facilitates (see: Bartle, 2004; Salen & Zimmerman, 2003), because their interests are in devising challenges to meet their players' preferences and tastes. Media content about videogames – aside from the above mentioned guides and walkthroughs – also often engage with this stratum, often seen in previews and reviews, through highlighting the challenge aspects of videogame content to introduce games to readers, enabling readers to imagine the experience a videogame could provide them. For players, these discussions allow them to make informed decisions in terms of videogame purchases; for the industry, they serve as advertisements.

Academics also engage extensively with the stratum of 'deducing gaming skill through analysing game content', and in doing so, the importance of gaming skill in the context of gaming is firmly theoretically established. Generally speaking, challenge is one key feature of the videogame media, thus skills are required to overcome it (Juul, 2009; Juul, 2005). Moreover, challenges exist consistently throughout most, if not all, videogames (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003), thus skill is required in almost all gaming activities. Based on this, a wide range of discussions have been carried out with the purpose of theorising the role gaming skill plays in shaping gaming experience, as I will show in next section. It has been argued that the joy and sense of achievement of triumphing over challenges is one of the most important reasons for why gaming is considered to be fun hence enjoyed by so many players (Juul, 2009; Juul, 2013; Lankoski, 2011; McAllister & Ruggill, 2010). The idea of enjoyment and challenges relate to a number of other psychological and sociological theories of play and game (see: Juul, 2013; Ohler & Nieding, 2006; Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006; Calleja, 2010; Sutton-Smith, 1997), and ties in with the motivation theory in particular (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, c1990; Christopher J. Ferguson, 2012; Yee, 2007; Przybylski, et al, 2009). Simply put, skill, because it is required to overcome challenges, is also a key element to players' experience of gaming and motivation for play. However, it is also interesting to note that the exact term *skill* (or expertise, performance, or similar terms) is almost never treated as a concept and properly discussed in the vast majority of academic and non-academic writings that examine the challenges in videogames. Instead, it appears that scholars and other writers are more interested in celebrating the many possibilities for players to make their own choices (Behrenshausen, 2012). In fact, the notion of skill is simply not discussed as a concept – even in discussions about cheating, the very activity that eliminates the involvement of skill (see: Atkins, 2003, p. 47; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al, 2013, p. 179).

Avoiding the notion of skill but focusing on the freedom of choice instead reveals, in a subtle way, that gaming is discussed as a distinctively neoliberal subject. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim point out that:

> Neoliberal economics rests upon an image of the autarkic human self. It assumes that individuals alone can master the whole of their lives, that they derive and renew their capacity for action from within themselves. (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. xxi)

While such an 'autarkic human self' simply could not exist in the physical world, as the authors point out later in the volume, videogames make it seem possible with their digital

worlds, especially with the emphasis placed on the freedom to choose what to do in a game instead of the necessity of obeying the rules.

In this sense, rules are not presented as limitations on one's capability as an individual, but as facilitators of the process for developing such capability, whereas challenges are just stepping stones for a player to realise and improve themselves *by themselves*. This is a sentiment shared by my participants. Almost all of my participants noted such a process in their everyday gaming, and indicated that this process offers a strong sense of empowerment and achievement. For example, this is how Mr DCRedfield, a male British participant, described his notion of gaming skill:

> In the context of videogames, just to be good at them, I guess. I think it requires, like a determination to not give up. If a game is really challenging, the skill is, like, [to] continue to play it, and get better at it. Like become more acquainted with the game system, and know how they *actually* work. (Emphasis added)

In this remark, Mr DCRedfield details the process that is enabled by the skill-based nature of gaming, through which gaming skill is improved. It is a process of practice ('continue to play it'), learning ('become more acquainted with the game system'), and reflection ('know how they *actually* work'). To Juul (2013, p. 60), this is typical of how a player learns to play, as challenges in single-player videogames could be considered as set 'puzzles' (Newman, 2013, p. 22), the solution to which are developed through trial-and-error. But more importantly, I argue, what Mr DCRedfield highlights is the exact reason why the skill-based aspect makes videogames particularly powerful in facilitating experiences that speak directly to the framing of 'autarkic human self'. To elaborate on this idea further, I must first address why I argue this neoliberal framing is introduced by the skill-based aspect of gaming, but not by the 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonist' aspect.

Returning to the private and personalised process of 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonist' 'day-dream' discussed in the **PRIVATE GAMING** section of **CHAPTER 5**, I argued that one possible way of understanding the private nature of gaming is that, as Campbell points out, engaging in such 'day-dreams' would remind the 'dreamer' to reflect on the flaws and inadequacies of their experienced physical reality in contrast to digitally real game-worlds. If we follow Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's argument that reflexivity by oneself is the key to dismantling the neoliberal myth of 'autarkic human self' (2002, p. xxi), then the 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' is by itself not inherently a neoliberal framing, despite both heavily relying on the 'bourgeois virtue'. Indeed, the 'bourgeois virtue', which aggressively

individualises the liability and responsibility, is central to the neoliberal framing of reality (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, pp. 42-44). The same 'bourgeois virtue', according to Campbell, is also what justifies the 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' (1987, pp. 202,224).

However, in contrast to the neoliberal teaching of 'bourgeois virtue', which is through the notion of 'autarkic human self' to emphasise the idea that the self is where the remedy for every flaw and inadequacy lies (Harvey, 2005, p. 181), 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' merely points towards to more 'day-dreams' and consumptions as a temporary solution that delays questions about such flaw and inadequacy (Campbell, 1987, pp. 88-95). In this sense, the 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' at its core is not using 'bourgeois virtue' to locate the root of flaw and inadequacy as neoliberal framings would, but only to vindicate it highly personalised, individualised, and private nature of itself. In fact, Campbell argues that the more elaborate a 'day-dream' becomes, the more salient the inadequacies seem to the 'dreamer' (ibid. p. 215), therefore it could actually facilitate the process of coming to a realisation about the 'fundamental incompleteness of self' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. xxi), which Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue to be crucial in dismantling the myth of 'autarkic human self' (2002, p. xxi). However, on the opposite end of the spectrum, because the 'modern autonomous imaginative' relies on the same 'bourgeois virtue' as neoliberalism, it could also be easily turned into something that serves neoliberal framings. In the case of gaming, according to my participants it is turned into a neoliberal framing by the skill-based aspect.

As discussed above, gaming skill is presented by videogames as an individual's capability of dealing with the challenges within them, and the designated process of improving gaming skill is through reflection on in-game failures and developing better ways to deal with the challenges *by oneself*. In other words, videogames – single-player games in particular, because gaming skill in multiplayer games is framed slightly differently under the same neoliberal principle, as I will discuss in next section – promise players paths to becoming the 'autarkic human self' in game worlds. In doing so, they turn the mechanism of self-reflexivity, which according to Beck and Beck-Gernheim would supposedly dismantle the myth of 'autarkic human self' (by revealing the 'fundamental incompleteness of self') (2002, p. xxi) into a process that reaffirms it. More importantly, because the skill-based aspect is an integral aspect of all videogames, this framing is also adapted to the framing of the videogame medium as a whole. To illustrate, I revisit the notion of 'day-dream', in particular the two layers of 'day-dream' discussed in previous chapters.

I have argued that in the case of videogames, the 'day-dream' consists of two layers. The first layer is the activity of gaming, in which players engage with digitally real game-worlds as games of make-believe for their imaginations. The second layer is more akin to what Campbell has described as 'day-dreams', that is, the process of desiring outside immediate entertainment. The discussion above indicates that what is being desired is more than the representational aspects of videogames (such as more imaginative scenery, story development and better in-game equipment), but also a self-perception of a skilled player who is capable of overcoming whatever kinds of challenges a videogame can offer. In other words, the second layer of the 'day-dream' is also about desiring an 'autarkic human self' in the first layer of the 'day-dream'. This is also probably why the vast majority of participants argued that gaming skill was not required for gaming, because it could always be developed as one keeps playing. Ms AOlimar, a female Chinese-British participant's remark on the necessity of gaming skill is rather representative of my participants' views on this matter:

> It is not necessarily a necessity I think. To say it is a necessity is like to say you need a certain grade to start to play certain game, 'if you don't have it you won't be able to play it', I think. I think skill helps – I mean not having skill in certain types of games shouldn't be a barrier in playing it, like they should be able to introduce you to the game quite easily.

This also helps with understanding why players sometimes see using a 'walkthrough' or 'strategy guide' as 'cheating' (Consalvo, 2007, pp. 88-89), because players are meant to 'figure things out' by themselves as an 'autarkic human', instead of resorting to external materials to atone for the 'fundamental incompleteness of self'. Although the vast majority of my participants did not express an opinion as strong as this, they nevertheless made it clear that resorting to such materials diminishes their sense of empowerment and achievement, as pointed out by Mr AP34:

> [Whether to use 'guides'] depends on what platform it is. PlayStation 3-wise I will not do it, because I want to get there; if I cannot get there, I will try harder. For games like RPG, I want to understand how a character works best and everything.

It should be noted that PlayStation 3 for Mr AP34, at the time of interview, was exclusively for single-player games. 'Getting there' by 'trying harder' is exactly what most single-player videogames encourage players to do (Juul, 2013, p. 62), by understanding 'how a character works'. It is possible because the challenge in single-player games are static and pre-determined, designed for players to 'figure it out' through repeated attempts to overcoming the

challenge (Juul, 2013, p. 74). This idea of 'avoiding using guides' was completely abandoned by my participants when it came to multiplayer gaming, and I will discuss this difference in greater detail later.

In general, participants' remarks on the notion of skill on the first stratum reaffirms what has already been argued about gaming skill, which is that it enables a psychologically and emotionally enjoyable process. The discussion above also shows the notion of gaming skill to be framed in a neoliberal sense that speaks directly to the notion of 'autarkic human self'. I shall emphasise that the 'autarkic human self' is only used to describe how gaming skill is presented and discussed by my participants, it does not carry implications beyond the immediate purpose of pointing out the neoliberal framing of the videogame medium and gaming experience. Although videogames are far less complex than the physical society in comparison, whether players could truly become the 'autarkic human self' even in a game-world is highly debatable, especially when the discussion pertains to deducing the role of gaming skill on the basis of analyses of videogame content. Because, as the stratification model points out, deducing skill and its role based on analyses of videogame content (stratum one) only informs us about the role skill could potentially play during gaming (stratum two), but to understand to what extent such framing matches the actual gaming experiences, we need to observe gaming in action – through direct engagement with the second stratum.

Before moving on to discuss the next two strata, I must emphasise that not all the remarks the participants made about gaming skill in the context of specific types of games could be categorised into the first stratum. Indeed, they very often talked about their understanding of gaming skill through this stratum of describing the skill that is required to overcome specific types of challenge. On the surface, this stratum is the 'go-to approach' when a participant was asked 'what is gaming skill to you?' A good example of a response to this question was given by Mr RMentat, a male British participant:

> In strategy games, you just need to think about things, resource management or build things in a specific order. It is some way similar to the way the scheme of mathematics. […] Whereas other games kind of requires faster reflexes, strategy games are mostly about how you think about things, what kind of things needs to be there, what your enemies would be doing.

Strategy games in this response refer to a type of videogame in which the core challenge is centred on the notion of 'strategic thinking'. Drawing on rule sets that are similar to those in traditional table-top games (such as Risk), strategy games challenge players' skill in 'carefully

[balancing] large numbers of interdependent variables' whilst observing opponents' strategic choices (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al, 2013, p. 49), and determining the best course of action. On this basis, we could appreciate the comparison made between the skill used in strategy games and mathematical schemes. Mr RMentat, a mathematician, explained to me after interview that, in layman's term, a mathematical scheme is a way to translate between numerical variables and geometrical variables – to him, this is very similar to the skill required in playing strategy games: a way to translate between numerical variables and tangible outcomes, be they short- or long-term.

However, I argue that it is debatable whether such a response could be categorised as knowledge that speaks to this stratum. Earlier in the interview, Mr RMentat mentioned that he played strategy games almost exclusively, hence this response appears to be less about analysing what skills strategy games require, but an account on the kind of gaming skill which he considered to have most impact on his moment-to-moment gaming experiences – this speaks more to the second stratum, as well as an account of the skill used most often in his everyday gaming. Hence this remark also speaks to the third stratum, which is gaming skill in the context of everyday gaming practice. For these two reasons, I am less inclined to discuss my participants' accounts on gaming skill, even those that were about specific genres of videogames, in relation to the first stratum. The first stratum is about deducing the notion of gaming skill based on analyses of videogame content, but the participants' remarks are more rooted in their actual experiences and not in deduction. I should emphasise that Mr RMentat was not the only participant who gave accurate and in-depth descriptions of what kind of gaming skill would be used for specific types of games. All participants did so in their interviews, mathematicians or not, and I will return to this shortly.

Stratum Two

It appears that the vast majority of studies about gaming skill that involve players take place on this stratum. Generally, gaming skill is termed differently by different researchers. For instance, it has been defined as 'skill(s)' (Bracken & Skalski, 2006), as 'expertise' (Schrader & McCreery, 2008) or as 'performance (capabilities)' (Shen et al, 2016). However, very few studies have attempted to address this issue/concept itself, or tried to define it from the players' perspective. Instead, skills as a concept is usually a tool used by the respective study to advance its own discussion, which usually focuses on something other than skills. Returning to the three examples above: Bracken and Skalski's discussion aims to address the experience of 'immersion' (2006); Schrader and McCreery's article focuses on untangling progression patterns and their correlation with the players' social-cultural backgrounds (2008); and

Shen et al's research seeks to 'debunk' the alleged gender differences in gaming performances (which are largely measured through the in-game progression system). Indeed, as Matthews and Weaver observe:

> User skill appears in the gaming literature in three ways: as control (primarily within content analyses), as a variable within data analyses, and anecdotally within discussion sections. (2013, p. 832)

More specifically, gaming skills are presented in the following three ways. Firstly, and often in textual analyses of videogames, skill is vaguely understood as a player's abilities to input commands that are required to overcome challenges, which were discussed previously. Secondly, and most usually in player studies, skill is not defined but only measured as a variable by in-game mechanisms that are almost always opaque to researchers – in-game scores, achievement systems, and others. Alternatively, skill is measured through self-evaluation, often on a scale from 'good' to 'bad'. Lastly, skill is sometimes mentioned as a direction where further research could be taken based on casual observation and personal experiences.

The latter two approaches to gaming skill described by Matthews and Weaver, in a way, further contribute to the methodological omission identified in academia's approach to engagement with the notion of skill through the first strata, that is the concept of 'skills' itself is rarely the subject of investigation – even in Matthews and Weaver's own research. In their study, skill is theorised as a variable, which they argue correlates to the potential impact that violent content might have on players. In their study, skill is not explicitly defined, but measured on one-dimension through self-assessment (supported by the relative frequency of the game, which is also self-reported). In a way, gaming skill is used as a 'God Term', as coined by rhetorician Burke (1969), to describe terms in which 'we can posit a world, in the sense that we can treat the world *in terms of it*, seeing all emanations, near or far, of its light'; however while doing so, we rarely 'ask ourselves what complexities [are] subsumed beneath it' (p. 105).

The analogy of 'God Term' accurately describes the methodological status of the concept of gaming skill in academia. In addition to that discussed above, another notable shared methodological characteristic of many existing studies about gaming skill is that they almost always focus on gaming experiences of specific games, or at least genres of games. Indeed, when discussions are confined to such specific contexts, discussing the nature of the skill appears almost redundant, because the vast majority of readers, namely scholars interested in games, have ample knowledge about games to understand what kind of skill sets are being

discussed – namely 'treat the world in terms of it', because we almost already know 'what complexities are subsumed beneath it'. Although this approach may serve the purposes of such studies, it nevertheless raises notable methodological concerns if examined from the critical realism perspective, which Bhaskar describes as 'the epistemic fallacy' of empirical ideal realism, as in 'statements about being can always be transposed into statements about our knowledge of being' (2008, p. 5). Generally speaking, this can be observed in three particular ways.

Firstly, this approach does not contribute much to a more systematic understanding of the notion of gaming skill. This approach assumes the existence of skill (and rightfully so), but only is concerned with establishing a 'correlation' between a seemingly measurable variable (skill level) and player experience, often underlined by the assumption that different levels of gaming skill will lead to different in-game activities, because certain action could only be successfully executed by 'high skill' players. In this case, the question 'what is gaming skill?' is reduced to 'how to prove gaming skill plays a role in shaping the experience of gaming?' Meanwhile, the question 'how does gaming skill impact the experience of gaming?' is reduced to 'do different gaming experiences relate to different gaming skills?' Both approaches reflect the exact 'epistemic fallacy' of ideal empiricism. Because, as Collier points out: 1) 'the question what *sort* of thing something is gets reduced to the question *how* we know about it'; and 2) 'the question whether A has causal/ontological primacy over B gets reduced to the question whether knowledge of A is presupposed by knowledge of B' are two of the four common manifestations of such fallacy (the other two will be discussed below) (1994, pp. 76-77, italic as in original).

Secondly, this approach implies different sets of gaming skills may play similar roles in shaping the experience of gaming. Depending on what rule system is being adopted in a game, challenges come in several different (more likely combinations of) types, which in turn require different types of skill (Juul, 2005, pp. 106-112; Juul, 2009; Genvo, 2009): reflexes, logical reasoning, strategic planning, spatial recognition, and others. Yet without theoretically examining the nature of skill being discussed and how (different levels of) skill impacts on the experience of gaming, this approach appears to be less interested in actually examining whether different sets of skills play different roles in different contexts and simply proves that the role of gaming skill could be investigated through it regardless of contextual matters. By doing so, it falls into another pitfall of the 'epistemic fallacy'; again, in Collier's words, 'the question whether A is identical to B gets reduced to the question whether our way of knowing A is identical to our way of knowing B' (1994, p. 77).

Thirdly, it undermines player's agency in the discussions about the role of gaming skill. As mentioned above, players' inputs are typically limited to simple self-identification on a scale from 'good' to 'bad'; players were rarely invited to give detailed accounts of how they understand the notion of gaming skill, let alone remarking on how gaming skill shapes their gaming experiences. This approach to gaming skill seems to be more reliant on players to verify the existence of gaming skill, rather than understanding how gaming skill matters to players, if at all. This is yet another manifestation of the 'epistemic fallacy', as Collier describes, 'the question whether something exits gets reduced to the question whether we can know that it exists' (1994, p. 76). Yet, as I exemplified with Mr RMentat's remark, players – at the very least, my participants – clearly have great in-depth understanding of what gaming skill is and, as I will showcase in following discussions, what role it plays in shaping their gaming experience.

Overall, on this stratum, gaming skill is often understood by academia as a flexible term that, at the very least, encompasses topics as varied as different types of capabilities, expertise, and moment-to-moment executions, which are argued to have a profound impact on how a player experiences gaming. Yet studies about gaming skill often do little more than produce an assumed existence of gaming skill based on the observed moment-to-moment gaming experiences of supposedly differently skilled players, or a vague understanding of the role that game skill plays based on the specific types of challenges that certain specific types of videogames offer. I argue that to do so falls into the trap of the 'epistemic fallacy' whereby 'statements about being can always be transposed into statements about our knowledge of being' (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 5). I will further demonstrate why it is a fallacy on an empirical level through my participants' remarks about gaming skill and its role in individual gaming sessions.

More than 'Good' to 'Bad'

My participants talked extensively about the role gaming skill plays in their individual gaming sessions. More importantly, they indicated that gaming skill is comprised of many different aspects of abilities that could not be simply measured by a scale between 'good' and 'bad'. For example, Ms YFWang, a female Chinese participant, described her gaming skill as follows:

> For example like me, I am not very skilled in combat, movement and positioning is always a problem for me. But I am really good at pathfinding, I think I am quite okay with that. My friends all think I am really good at finding ways through mazes or stuff like that. Overall I do not think I am not very skilled at gaming.

In this remark, she highlighted two aspects of gaming skill that she saw as distinct from each other: the skill of combat and the skill of pathfinding. Although she did not consider herself to be a particularly skilled player when reflecting on her overall gaming experiences, she nevertheless believed that she was skilled in some aspects of it. Ms YFWang's remark also calls back to the first problem with a common approach to discussing gaming skill and its impact on gaming experience, which is that players see gaming skill as a multi-layered and nuanced concept, it does not lend itself neatly to a scale. Moreover, the participants not only rated themselves differently on what they perceived as different aspects of gaming skill, they also did not appear to agree a consensus on what abilities could be regarded as gaming skill and what could not. A good example of such disagreement can be seen remarks made by two participants. The following remark on the importance of gaming skill was made by a female British participant, Ms LToad:

> If it is a fast paced game, like **MARIO KART**, then skill is important. But then in puzzle solving game, it is more like just thinking. […] It is just like a game you don't need to push buttons, you just need to be smart with the game, smart with solving puzzles. […] It is like you don't need specific videogame skills. Like the [hand-eye] coordination needed for other videogames.

Ms LToad clearly indicates that, for her, the notion of gaming skill is more concerned with hand-eye coordination and inputting proper commands in a rapid manner – which is what she meant by 'push buttons'. She was also clearly tentative about whether the skill in solving puzzles could be described as 'gaming skill', because such skill is not a 'specific videogame' skill. In contrast to Ms LToad, another female British participant, MS SShelb, specifically highlighted the skill in solving puzzles as an important component of gaming skill:

> I think skills are more defined by how you can approach a situation in a game, like decision-making as well […] solving puzzles, […] that kind of things as well, get thrown [into] the situation.

It should be noted that the 'puzzles' these participants were referring to related to the same videogame franchise, the **PHOENIX WRIGHT: ACE ATTORNEY** games. This franchise's entries are typically categorised as visual novel adventure games, in which players are tasked with solving murder mysteries[32]. Yet, these two participants clearly had different notions on whether the skill required to overcome the challenges in these games could be described as 'gaming

[32] See: http://www.capcom.com/phoenixwright/ Accessed on: 05/02/18.

skill'. In other words, they had different views on what the term 'gaming skill' means. Moreover, note that Ms LToad suggested the impact gaming skill had on the gaming experience varies from one game to another. This notion further problematizes any approach that only conceptualises gaming skill on a scale between 'good' and 'bad'. Ms LToad's opinion was echoed by almost all participants. For example, this how her Chinese peer Ms SLiang responded to the question 'do you think gaming skill is important?':

> Not exactly. It might be important in the context of big MMO games or other online multiplayer games. But not always, because most of the time it is single-player, or you only play by yourself. Therefore I do not think it is very important, as long as you are enjoying it.

Setting aside the curiously worded phrase 'play by yourself' for a moment, as I will return to it later. In this remark, Ms SLiang suggests that gaming skill would have less impact on the single-player experience. Indeed, the last chapter shows that the experience of the skill-based aspect of gaming is framed by the players' own perception of the skill being performed, but not the 'objective measure'. Moreover, the self-perception is moderated by the goals a player sets up for themselves for each gaming session. Because challenges in single-player games are typically static and pre-designed, players have much freedom in setting up or adjusting their own goals during this process to make the skill-based aspect of the gaming experience enjoyable. On the other hand, Ms SLiang's view that gaming skill 'matters more' in the context of multiplayer gaming was also shared by almost all participants. This implies that, for my participants, the approach of moderating gaming experiences by adjusting goals is less viable in the context of multiplayer gaming, therefore resulting in their level of gaming skill having a more noticeable impact on their gaming experience of online multiplayer gaming sessions. To better understand the different roles that gaming skill plays in different gaming contexts, which is shared by almost all participants, we should firstly consider the difference between challenges in multiplayer games and single-player games.

Gaming Skill and Online Multiplayer Gaming

As I argued in **CHAPTER 3**, in the online multiplayer games that were talked about by my participants, the challenge was not dictated by game designers, but primarily determined by other players (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al, 2013, p. 152) who are far more unpredictable and volatile than a pre-determined gameplay system. As such, it is much more difficult for a player to set up appropriate goals in advance to moderate their self-perception of skill and perception of challenge, since they would not know what kind of challenge awaits, and what

level of skill is required. This is also the case with cooperative multiplayer games, because a player would not be able to reliably predict how their teammates would perform during a game, and what kind of gaming skill they might need to mobilise to cooperate with them. In my view, multiplayer gaming appeals to players not because 'playing against another player is more challenging' (Weibel, et al, 2008, p. 2287), but because of the unpredictability that human players bring to the skill-based aspect of gaming – such unpredictability keeps the first-layer of the 'day-dream' fresh.

More importantly, unpredictable challenges shift the role of gaming skill, in comparison with the context of single-player gaming. Because human opponents are much less predictable in moment-to-moment gameplay, not to mention that players typically play with different human opponents in each session, challenges in individual gaming sessions are always somewhat unique. In turn, a player would not have the opportunity to develop a solution for one particular challenge through reflection. In this sense, the gaming skill that is required to succeed in a session of online multiplayer gaming is more about properly reacting to opponents' actions in moment-to-moment gaming, and less about developing solutions for pre-determined challenges through reflection as in single-player games. Therefore, having higher levels of gaming skill would contribute directly to succeeding more often in a multiplayer online gaming session, as participants pointed out.

The above presented interpretation also helps to better understand a seemingly contradictory attitude towards videogame guides. In the last section I argued that gaming and gaming skill is often discussed in an implicit neoliberal framing, which is to present developing skills for overcoming challenges as a process of realising the potential of the 'autarkic human self' of gaming, since gaming is a matter of 'making the right choice' rather than 'having the right skill'. Building on this, I further argued that this framing lends additional materials such as walkthroughs or guides with the taint of 'cheating', because resorting to such external assistance undermines the neoliberal notion of 'autarkic human self'. However, although the vast majority of participants indicated that they would only use guides for single-player games very sparingly, they would rather freely consult guides for multiplayer games. For the sake of consistency, here is what Mr AP34 said about using guides for multiplayer game, following the remark discussed earlier:

> [Guides] will save me a lot of time, and at the same time will help me to develop. So I can do it in the hard way, but in MMO RPG, I am not going to put more time that it already is. So for **LEAGUE OF LEGENDS**, I will just watch champion guides, items and

> stuff, or some YouTube video, how to fight better. Or **ELDER SCROLLS** [Online], what kind of skills will help you to get a lot cash in this place, and a lot of coins, everything, I will just do that.

In the excerpt above, Mr AP34 clearly indicated that he saw guides for online multiplayer games as a 'time saving' measure, a way of shortening the time required for reflecting on his own gaming experience and developing the gaming skill for online multiplayer games. I argue that using guides for multiplayer games was vindicated by participants, because unlike single-player games, online multiplayer games present themselves through the frame of a 'meritocracy' that is designed to prioritise overcoming all the challenges in moment-to-moment gaming – winning matches or accumulating in-game resources (such as 'cash' or 'coins' mentioned in the excerpt) – above everything else. To better elaborate on this argument, I shall firstly discuss the notion of 'meritocratic' framing.

It has been argued that, in a crude sense, the skill-based aspects of online multiplayer videogames are often framed as a 'meritocracy' by the gaming community and media content about videogames (Oliva, et al, 2016; Juul, 2013, p. 81; Paul, 2018). It is a 'meritocracy' because videogames claim that in-game achievement is always proportionally rewarded to players based on the level of skill the player has (Juul, 2013, p. 81; Oliva, et al, 2016). In other words, unlike single-player videogames, which are sold to players as introspective journeys to become the 'autarkic human self' of gaming, online multiplayer games are presented as playgrounds where players can prove that they are the most skilled by obtaining as many achievements as possible.

To illustrate such a 'meritocratic' representation of gaming skill, consider the example of **OVERWATCH**, an extremely popular (35 million players worldwide according to publisher Activision Blizzard) online multiplayer team-versus-team shooter. I should also emphasise that the system I describe below is by no means unique to **OVERWATCH**; many competitive online multiplayer games have similar systems, albeit using different terminology. In **OVERWATCH** a match consists of 12 players, who are divided into two teams at random. Each player picks one of the 26 'heroes', each with unique abilities. In competitive mode, the game requires a new player to play 10 'placement matches'. Once the player finishes all matches, they receive a 'Skill Rating' from 1 to 5,000, based on the wins and losses of the 10 games, moderated by their in-game performance. This 'Skill Rating' is calculated through an algorithm that is entirely hidden from the player. Each additional game the player plays in competitive mode either rewards, in the case of winning, or retracts, in the case of loss, a few 'Skill Rating' points

from the initially received 'Skill Rating', with the same hidden algorithm deciding the exact amount. Depending on the amount of 'Skill Rating' a player has, they would further be assigned a 'tier': 1-1,499 is 'bronze', 1,500-1,999 is 'silver', 2,000-2,499 is 'gold', 2,500-2,999 is 'platinum', 3,000-3,499 is 'diamond', 3,500-3,999 is 'master', and 4,000 and above is 'grandmaster'. Additionally, the top 500 players with the most 'Skill Rating' points are grouped into a different tier, simply named the 'top 500'. All tiers are permanently attached to the player's in-game portrait whenever they play the competitive mode.

It can therefore be seen why online multiplayer games with ranking systems, such as **OVERWATCH**, are often described as a 'meritocracy', because they echo the several key hallmarks of such systems (as discussed in: Littler, 2018). It directly awards achievements to players in proportion to what the system perceives as 'merit' (Littler, 2018, p. 8), namely gaming skill in winning matches or accumulation resources – literally ranked in a hierarchy in the case of **OVERWATCH**. This system promises mobility and equality as a 'meritocracy' would (Littler, 2018, p. 28) – choose one of the heroes that best fits your play style, practise and win more games to climb the ladder, and gain various rewards. Such a game encourages competition, as 'meritocracy' does (Littler, 2018, p. 28).

I should emphasise that I use the term 'meritocracy' in a similar way to the term 'autarkic human self'; by doing so I am only highlighting the neoliberal framing of gaming skill through demonstrating the strong resemblance between the 'meritocratic' conceptualisation of the relationship between skill and achievement and how such a relationship is presented in online multiplayer videogames. Similar to this study's approach to the term 'autarkic human self', I will not be engaging with the broader concept of 'meritocracy' outside the immediate context of online multiplayer games' representation of the relationship between gaming skill and in-game achievement[33].

[33] In my view, such 'meritocratic' framing is still just a façade, because it has already been acknowledged by a number of scholars that no videogame could offer a completely fair and level playground that could actually allow whoever decided to play the game to succeed as a 'meritocracy' would suggest. In the case of OVERWATCH, having 26 heroes with unique abilities does not level the playground. Indeed having more choices diversifies the paths, but OVERWATCH always rewards certain skills (such as reflexes and hand-eye coordination) more than others (such as teamwork), even though the latter contributes to the player's success. This preference for reflexes is because the game is still fundamentally a first person shooter. Although the algorithm used to calculate reward is hidden from players, it is not hard to imagine that no matter how good a player is in coordinating a team, it will not win any games until the player starts to land some shots. However, since discussion of such is beyond the scope of this study, I will not expand on it further.

Similar to the 'meritocracy' framing that is used by modern neoliberalism (Littler, 2013, p. 55), the 'meritocracy' framing in online multiplayer videogames permits players to do whatever it takes to reach higher ranks as long as the actions are permitted by the rules. However, unlike the modern neoliberal society, online multiplayer videogames have far less constraints. Online multiplayer videogames only penalise players for tampering with certain core aspects of the videogame software (Yan & Randell, 2009) or more recently for 'bad' in-game behaviour defined by developers[34]. And videogames certainly cannot penalise players' actions outside of the games, such as using guides. This in turn could be seen by players as permission to do everything else to obtain in-game achievement, including consulting guides. Therefore, as my participants stated, using guides for online multiplayer games is not only common, but also completely justified – guides could help them achieve as much as possible and as quickly as possible in multiplayer games. Additionally, the 'meritocratic' framing also provides us with yet another way of understanding why gaming skill was considered by my participants as more important in the context of online multiplayer gaming than in that of single-player gaming: gaming skill is important in the context of online multiplayer gaming, because the 'meritocratic' frame suggests that a player's gaming skill determines their position within the hierarchy of players of an online multiplayer game.

Neoliberal Framing of Gaming Skill and Individual Gaming Sessions

I should emphasise that the framing of 'meritocracy' does not replace that of 'autarkic human self' discussed above. If we are to follow Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002, p. xxi) argument that the notion of 'autarkic human self' is what enables neoliberalism, then 'meritocracy' as a distinctively neoliberal expression (Littler, 2018) must automatically subsume this notion of 'autarkic human self'. In other words, online multiplayer games also present themselves as journeys to become the 'autarkic human self' of gaming. Notably, the path that is designated to players through which they 'climb the ladder' is a path to the ever-elusive goal of becoming a highly skilled player who could overcome whatever challenge is ahead. This framing is best reflected in Ms BHawk's (female British) account of her process of improving her skill in playing **LEAGUE OF LEGENDS**, an online competitive multiplayer game that is similar to **DOTA 2** discussed in earlier chapters, which she considered herself to be 'not bad at':

[34] For more details, see: https://kotaku.com/riot-blizzard-and-twitch-are-teaming-up-to-fight-toxi-1823941488, last accessed 23/03/18.

> Ms BHawk: […] Like I remember it when I first start to play it, I was terrible. Cos you don't really know what's going on, you can't really remember all the buttons and combos, you don't really know what is happening.
> Interviewer: So what happened that makes you actually being good at the game?
> Ms BHawk: I just kept playing it. I sometimes get bit discouraged, sort of like I will never play it again. But you just kept going back to it, you just keep on getting better and better. [...] Like learning what to do, you learn how to place walls, you learn to how to cast spells, you learn different things by playing with different people. On different levels.

In this exchange she describes a process that could be seen as a process of realising the desire of becoming an 'autarkic human self' in gaming. Through practice, learning, and reflection on each gaming session, she gradually developed her skill in playing the game, moving ever closer to the goal of being 'good at **LEAGUE OF LEGENDS**' – however she defined it. Therefore, I argue the process she described is more akin to that of grinding, discussed in **CHAPTER 5**.

Generally speaking, grinding in the study of videogames and gaming refers to the process of repeatedly playing the same section of videogame, and enduring the sub-optimal, arguably 'boring' gaming experience of such repetition, in order to accumulate in-game resources. In the last chapter, I argued that players are willing to engage with grinding because the inherent 'boring-ness' of it is offset by the enjoyment of the second layer of the 'day-dream' of modern autonomous imaginative hedonism – that is, the enjoyment of imagining what the accumulated resources would allow them to do. Similar to grinding, Ms BHawk indicated that she had to endure less pleasant gaming experiences due to what she believed to be her lack of skill in playing **LEAGUE OF LEGENDS**, which she described as 'discouraging'. However she 'kept [on] going back to it' despite the sub-optimal moment-to-moment gaming experiences, in order to develop her gaming skill. It is not a huge leap to argue that what kept her 'going back to it' was the second-layer of 'day-dream', which is the 'autarkic human self' of gaming, eventually being skilled enough to enjoy the game.

Ms BHawk's remark indicates that the frames of journey to the 'autarkic human self' of gaming would indeed contribute to how players deal with the impact of gaming skill on the gaming experience of individual gaming sessions, in this case enduring the sub-optimal experiences. All Chinese participants and the majority of Western participants suggested that they had very similar experiences of improving their gaming skills for online multiplayer games as described by Ms BHawk, that is they were motivated to keep playing online multiplayer

games despite less pleasant moment-to-moment gaming experiences[35]. Therefore, my participants indicated that online multiplayer gaming was presented to them as a journey to 'autarkic human self' in a 'meritocracy'. Conversely, it could also be argued that the framing of 'journey to "autarkic human self"' presented by single-player games also implies that single-player games are just as 'meritocratic', as only could single-player games claim that every player has the opportunity to achieve the goal by taking the journey of becoming the 'autarkic human self' of gaming. The difference between the two types of games is that while single-player games emphasise the framing of the 'journey to "autarkic human self"', online multiplayer games more explicitly emphasise the framing of 'meritocracy'. The two different emphases were reflected in my participants' remarks on the different importance of gaming skill in different types of gaming scenarios, as well as in their accounts on their different approach to guides.

Taken together, this helps us to understand a seemingly contradictory way in which my participants talked about the skill-based aspect of gaming. On the one hand, as discussed in **CHAPTER 4**, 'the sense of achievement' was only mentioned by a relatively small proportion of participants as their motivation for gaming. On the other hand, they discussed skill-based aspects of gaming experiences extensively during their interviews, as showcased in the remarks and accounts discussed in **CHAPTERS 5** and **6**. This indicates that while considering the skill-based aspect of gaming as important – if not the most important – part of their everyday gaming experiences, they did not overcome challenges just for the sense of achievement, but because overcoming challenges is folded into the 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonist' 'day-dream' that makes videogames fun. Either to fulfil the journey to become the 'autarkic human self' of gaming, or to succeed in the 'meritocracy' of online multiplayer games, a player must overcoming challenges. This further reminds us that the skill-based aspect be conceptualised with in gaming-experiences as an entirety, just as challenges are argued to be an integral part of game-worlds.

In terms of methodology, understanding the neoliberal framing of gaming skill also provides further insights into why gaming skill as a concept is rarely discussed. If we are to accept the neoliberal framing of gaming skill, then we can immediately trivialise any discussion about the nuances and the exact components that make up gaming skill in the context of actual gaming sessions. This is because videogames are either a) in the case of single-player games,

[35] It should be noted, however, that Ms BHawk was one of only two participant who explicitly argued that gaming skill was not important regardless of the game being played.

introspective journeys that await players' achieving an 'autarkic human self', where skill could always be developed through practise; or b) in the case of online multiplayer games, a 'meritocracy' that could always accurately gauge a player's skill level with its in-game systems. This is because both neoliberal framing of videogames, a journey for 'autarkic human self', and 'meritocracy', imply that videogames are perfectly fair systems, that games are always designed to create equal access to success for everyone, regardless of prior experiences, existing expertise, and innate abilities – or resources that are available to a player (Oliva, et al, 2016, p. 10). As such, the only difference between a 'skilled' player and a 'less skilled' player is the amount of effort they invest in gaming – after all, any player would be able to master the skill that is required to play, as long as they tried hard enough. Thus gaming experiences could be comfortably categorised according to the 'level of gaming skill' without the knowledge of what gaming skill as a concept actually means.

In practice, the neoliberal framing justification only uses self-evaluation and in-game achievement to measure a player's skill level; it is not concerned with asking players what they actually mean by placing an indicator on the scale between 'good' and 'bad' for themselves. However, the discussion above shows this approach to be highly problematic, even setting aside its neoliberal implications. In the last section, I demonstrated that: 1) participants indicated that gaming skill, even in the context of a given game, could refer to different 'sub-sets' of gaming skills, and they sometimes considered themselves to be good at one 'sub-set' but not at another; and 2) participants did not always agree on what skills could be regarded as part of gaming skill, even in the context of a given game. Additionally, my participants suggested that they understood the notion of gaming skill and its impact on gaming experience notably differs in different contexts, for example between single-player games and multiplayer games. Moreover, my participants also indicated that such differences in their conceptualisation of gaming skill also had impact on the ways in which they play with videogames, in this how they use guides (in the next section I will explore this topic further). This further adds to my argument that players – at the very least my participants – did not understand the notion of gaming skill and its impact on experiences of individual gaming sessions in a one-dimensional fashion as just being 'good' or 'bad', or anywhere inbetween.

More broadly speaking, my participants' accounts of their understanding of gaming skill in the context of individual gaming sessions and its impact on their gaming experiences further demonstrates why approaching skill only as an indicator on a scale falls into the trap of the 'epistemic fallacy' described by Bhaskar, that is, developing 'an implicit ontology based on the category of experience' and 'an implicit realism based on the presumed characteristics

of the objects of experience' (2008. p. 5). I argue this is exactly what the approach of understanding skill only as an indicator does: it categorises different gaming experiences by different levels of gaming skill, with gaming skill itself being assumed based on the neoliberal framing of videogames. It is a fallacy not only because this approach ignores all the nuances in the players' understandings of gaming skill and its impact on gaming experiences of individual gaming sessions, but more importantly, as Bhaskar argues, committing to this fallacy ignores what makes experiences 'in fact significant in science', or why we engage with this stratum (investigating actual gaming experiences) in the first place – 'antecedent social activity' (2008, p. 5), namely all the socio-cultural and political activities that have led to such experiences. He further points out that, by ignoring the 'antecedent social activity', we are contributing to an 'epistemological individualism in which men are regarded as passive recipients of given facts and recorders of their given conjunctions' (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 5).

Bhaskar's argument calls back to the discussions in **CHAPTERS 1** and **2**, in particular those in which I elaborated on the inspiration taken from Media Studies and Audience Studies in the Methodology section of **CHAPTER 2**. Not only has Audience Studies been combating such 'epistemological individualism' that has assumed audiences to be passive receivers for over half a century, it has also developed effective methodologies for addressing this problem. This study, as mentioned in **CHAPTER 2**, draws particular inspiration from Nick Couldry's practice theory (2014, p. 224). Not to repeat what has already been discussed in-depth in **CHAPTER 2**, the core of practice theory concerns understanding the media-user relationship through examining what Bhaskar terms 'antecedent social activity', or in Couldry's words: 'the mass of things people do and say (and indeed believe) that are oriented to, or related to, media' (2014, p. 217). As such I turn to this direction for the rest of this chapter, which is also the third stratum, concerning the notion of gaming skill in the context of players' everyday gaming activities.

Stratum Three

The third stratum, as mentioned above, understands gaming skill as a concept in itself in the context of a player's everyday life and investigates how it impacts a player's everyday play activity. Unlike the previous two strata, the third stratum is rarely engaged academically. Granted, this is largely due to the underwhelming focus on gaming as an everyday activity in general. Thus, here I focus on my participants' accounts of gaming skill in everyday gaming. A good place to start is with their responses to the fundamental question, 'what is gaming skill for you?'

Conceptualising Gaming-Skills through everyday Gaming/Play

In the sections above, I have suggested that the concept of skills does not just relate to the widespread and capacious meaning of the term itself within gaming, Game Studies and the wider gaming industry. I have also suggested that the term is framed by and reflects the range of different games the participants played. Generally speaking, while the angles from which they approached this question were similar, their delineations always drew on one or more particular type of game, which were, typically, those they were most familiar with at the time of interview, sometimes also supplemented by games we talked about during their interviews (which were mostly the games the participants brought up themselves). This suggests that the underpinning rationales for their concept of skill were drawn primarily or perhaps substantively from their own gaming experience, and it is this latter issue that demands further interrogation.

Mr QWang, for example (in keeping with the majority of the male Chinese participants), showed a strong interest in Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) games. He stated that, at the time of interview, he was playing **DEFENDERS OF THE ANCIENT 2** (**DOTA 2**) almost exclusively. As mentioned above, **DOTA 2** is a fast-paced competitive PC game that features a wide range of 'heroes', each with different abilities for players to choose from. The game is usually played in a 5 versus 5 format, which is to say a team of 5 players play against another team of 5. Mr QWang defined gaming skill(s) as such:

> Control, namely the speed of which [one] makes mouse-clicks and keyboard commands. This is the most important [skill]. Then there is the reflex. Besides [those], the teamwork, being able to work with your teammates tacitly is also very important. Also there is understanding of the game, how each hero works.

It is notable that all the aspects of skill(s) highlighted by Mr QWang correspond to the characteristics of **DOTA 2**. Indeed, a swift operating ability and fast reflexes are important because of the pacing of the game. Teamwork ability is crucial not least because of the team-versus-team combat format; and knowledge about the 'heroes' is required not only in choosing a well-rounded team with relevant skills, but also because such knowledge pertains to pre-empting opponents' choices and actions. By comparison with Mr QWang, Ms SShelb was primarily playing single-player adventure games at the time of interview. She articulated her understanding of skill(s) as such:

> I think you need have a lot attention to detail. I say when I was a kid, me and my dad used to play through a lot the first **TOMB RAIDER**, you need to think a lot [in] this type

> of game, it wasn't obvious. […] I know a lot of championship tournament, like how fast you can react to somebody else, that just seems to be a different type of skill people tend to celebrate nowadays. […] I think skills are more defined by how you can approach a situation in a game, like decision making as well. Like Tell-Tale games, the **WALKING DEAD**, the **TOMB RAIDER** ones, solving puzzles. I also play **PHOENIX WRIGHT** games on the DS, that kind of thing as well, get thrown into the situation. And stealth is a big one as well, which I am not really good at.

Nostalgia and self-deprecation aside, in a similar vein to Mr QWang, the skills Ms SShelb highlighted were also largely informed by the types of games that she was playing/interested in (at the time of interview at least). Adventure games typically do not emphasise fast-paced, competitive combat. Instead, they feature puzzles of different types. Additionally, split-second reactions are not usually a pressing issue for players while playing adventure games. Correspondingly, Ms SShelb's conceptualisation of skills drew more on puzzle solving/logic reasoning than control or reflex. In fact, it seemed that she did not quite appreciate the strong emphasis on reflex (or hand-eye coordination) in the modern competitive gaming scene (often referred to as 'e-Sports').

The point I am making, then, is that participants conceptualise gaming skill in relation to and through their own gaming experiences and it is therefore no significant leap to suggest that those who play a variety of different games would also conceptualise gaming-skill(s) in a more generic sense. For example Ms AOlimar told me that she enjoys games of almost all genres. Not only was she playing **DOTA 2** on a regular basis, but she also played a range of adventure/action/puzzle games. This is her take on the concept of skill(s):

> I think skills in the context of videogames, is not so much as in sports, as being physical. It is about mental skill. Like, sort of knowledge [about] how the game works, and how to sort of best use part of the game, to make sure you do well in it. […] I think it is about how well you understand the game, and how you employ that understanding into the actual gameplay.

Taken together then, these examples suggest that we need to understand the layered meaning that such a concept of skill holds as well as the fact that immediate context bears a significant relation to how a concept is articulated at any given time. On the one hand, it highlights the fluidity of the concept – which presumably would be explained with different emphases at different times. As such, it is not a stretch to imagine that if I was to ask my participants to identify their gaming skill somewhere on the scale between 'good' and 'bad', they

would be essentially making an already highly subjective measurement on very different criteria. In turn, the usefulness of such indicators in helping us to understand the role of gaming skill, either in actual gaming sessions or in everyday gaming, is highly questionable. On the other hand, this observation also indicates the need for knowledge of games, genre and experience in undertaking such research. Indeed, if I had no awareness of the different demands and experiences of genres and how different genres have changed over time, some of these subtleties would be lost. This is a reminder then of the necessity of such frameworks like experience and context being shared and understood by both researchers and participants.

More generally speaking, the salient relation discussed above between a participant's conceptualisation of gaming skill and their everyday gaming experiences further indicates that gaming skill could not be simply measured as self-reflection or otherwise. It necessitates an approach that could take many other factors – or 'antecedent social activity' in Bhaskar's term (2008, p. 5) into account. I argue one way to approach it is to inspect it through the lenses of time and space. This is because, as discussed in **CHAPTER 2**, both could play critical roles in how we approach everyday media uses:

> It makes a great difference whether any particular act of media consumption is part of a continuous flow or a discrete act, anticipated in time or marked off from the day's activities in some other way; the patterning of media use in time may also be overlaid on the patterning of space (Bakardjeva, 2005; Bengstsson, 2006). (Couldry, 2012, p. 223, references in original)

I turn to the notion of time and space in the following sections, but I will begin with a seemingly 'cultural' difference between how the Chinese and Western participants talked about gaming skill.

One issue to note at this point is that it was somewhat noticeable that the Chinese participants in my study seemed to have a stronger awareness of the concept of skill(s) in terms of being able to articulate it and in terms of demonstrating some reflection on this concept. Indeed, the Chinese participants appeared to have been pondering this concept more often than their Western peers, or at least understood the question without further clarification. A question about skill was considered to be entirely appropriate, despite the question, 'what is gaming skill to you?', sounding rather awkward in Chinese, because there is no linguistic equivalent of 'gaming skill' in Chinese – of course I could just make one up, and indeed I did, but this is not how the Chinese gaming community talks about gaming skill. Speaking from

my experience, discussions about gaming skill in the Chinese gaming community focuses more on the notion of '(know) how', in ways such as 'how to beat this level' or 'how to play this character better', or even 'how to improve my level of performance', but not 'what skills do I need to play better'. When complimenting a player, the typical phrasing is that 'she is a very good [certain game] player', but not 'she is skilled in this game'. Although essentially talking about the same notion of gaming skill, the way the Chinese gaming community discusses gaming skill is more situational and context-dependent. By comparison, about half of the Western participants asked me to further elaborate on my question, and expressed some consternation with it (in the sense that they suggested that gaming does not require skill, as mentioned above). What I want to argue here then, is that this difference stems from the fact that the idea of skill(s) has a different sense and prominence across Chinese and Western cultures.

First and foremost, we should note the influence of the gaming 'market' within and across these cultures in shaping everyday gaming and hence contributing to the different understanding of the concept. To understand this influence, I will first give an overview of the Chinese gaming market. The Chinese gaming market is in general much less diverse than the Western gaming market despite its sheer size[36]. By diversity, I am only referring to the types of games that are available. For instance, at the time of writing (2018), two of the mainstream current generation home consoles, Xbox One and PlayStation 4 have gained permission to enter the Chinese gaming market, yet as far as I am aware, very few games have obtained the relevant permissions to be published in Mainland China. Of course, this will not prevent players obtaining these games through overseas purchases and online distribution. But doing so would make already expensive videogames even more costly, therefore unavailable to the larger gaming population. More importantly, this also means that the majority of Western 'mainstream games', single-player or multiplayer, have not been legally published or promoted in China. As such, Western videogame publishers have a much smaller media presence in the Chinese gaming market. The awareness of games that we might consider to be 'mainstream' in the Western gaming culture is actually relatively low amongst Chinese players. Indeed, almost none of the Chinese participants had heard of the games I offered for the gaming session, despite their relative popularity amongst the Western participants. This cre-

[36] According to a Bloomberg article in 2017, the Chinese gaming market comprised 600 million players, and generated US$26.4 billion in revenue; see: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-06-01/china-just-became-the-games-industry-capital-of-the-world, last accessed: 05/02/18.

ated a rather different gaming scenario (**CHAPTER 2)**, and often resulted in Chinese participants asking me to choose a game for them instead of picking one based on their own preferences – they told me they simply had no idea which one to prefer, because they knew very little about those games. It is worth remembering that all of my Chinese participants were MA students at the University of Leeds at the time of interview, meaning that they had at least come from middle class families. In other words, theoretically speaking, they had both the monetary and linguistic resources to engage with Western gaming culture, yet they did not appear to have such interests.

Instead, the games mentioned by the Chinese participants during their interviews were primarily the high-profile games that had obtained official approval, and therefore have strong media presence, in China, such as **LEAGUE OF LEGENDS**, **DEFENDERS OF THE ANCIENTS II**, **WORLD OF WARCRAFT**, **JIAN XIA III** (a Chinese MMORPG heavily inspired by **WORLD OF WARCRAFT**), alongside several notable mobile games, such as **CANDY CRUSH SAGA**. Although one could argue that the Chinese players enjoyed freer access (to games) due to normalised videogame piracy (discussed in **CHAPTER 3**), it is notable from my participants at least that Chinese gaming culture appeared to be largely oblivious to the so-called 'mainstream games' of Western gaming culture, on console or otherwise. It is not to say such players do not exist in China, but based on what I heard from my participants, those players did not seem to represent the 'mainstream' Chinese gaming culture.

Herein lies what I mean by the influence of the market. As suggested above, the participants' conceptualisation of gaming skill appeared to be firmly rooted in the games they actually knew and often played. In other words, the Chinese participants' gaming experience was primarily of online multiplayer and arcade-style games, in which gaming skill plays a much more prolific role than it does in single-player games. Such games are notable for their highly competitive elements (such as **LEAGUE OF LEGENDS**, **DEFENDER OF THE ANCIENTS**, or MMORPGs), but they are rarely structured, or narrative driven. Unlike single-player games that were presented as journeys to realise the 'autarkic human self' through reflexivity and developing gaming skill, online multiplayer games are framed as 'meritocracies'. This draws players' focus primarily on winning over other players in moment-to-moment gaming. In direct correlation and in keeping with the comments from my Chinese participants, the more 'skilled' a player is, the more likely they are to achieve this goal. In turn, possession of high level gaming skill is glamorised as a desirable state, as Mr DWang (Chinese male) put it:

> For those who can actually play the game well, those who have good skill(s), you would indeed have some respect [for them…] Like frontman of an e-sports team, or those who you simply could not defeat in online games, or those who could make very good decks in **HEARTHSTONE**, [I] indeed would respect them somewhat.

Regardless of how a player would react to a loss in a competitive game against others – there is no shortage of stories about players getting frustrated or even enraged due to losing online competitive games – being more skilled in a competitive game is described by Mr DWang as a more desirable state, as the so-called 'meritocratic' framing of online multiplayers suggests. This is a view expressed by almost all Chinese participants – even though many of them expressed the idea that gaming skill is in general unimportant in the context of single-player games, all of them talked extensively about the importance of skill in multiplayer games. Although this view, as mentioned above, was repeated by some of their Western peers, the Chinese participants devoted noticeably more effort to discussing it, usually in lengthy accounts about how gaming skill related to their everyday gaming and play activities.

For example, over half of the male Chinese participants expressed strong interest in high-skill gaming, particularly in the form of e-sports (professional competitive gaming) and expert guide and performance videos. Other than viewing video guides produced by professional players as references (to improve their own skills), they also often spectated on matches between professional players, tournaments or otherwise, for entertainment. In comparison, only one of my Western participants mentioned similar playing-with-videogame activities. On the other hand, although the female Chinese participants did not express as strong a passion for e-sports as their male colleagues, they nonetheless talked at length about the notion of gaming skill in the context of gaming spectators. Ms YFWang said:

> I don't know exactly how to improve skills. I am amongst those who watch expert videos and being amazed at the spectacle. […] I believe that skill could be developed through extensive practice. But my roommate has been playing MMO for years, and she believes that [having better] skill is dependent on innate talent, because she is still not very good at it. […] I do not really mind whether having the skills. Yet if you are playing with someone else, having bad skills could be bit face-losing [sic]. But if playing all by oneself, it doesn't matter how bad the skills is. Because I've seen with my own eyes how bad one of my roommates was at it, it indeed made us [other roommates] feel speechless, it was really that astronomically bad – she showed us the some expert video, we firstly thought all could do just that, but witnessing her

> performance was rather disappointing. […] Witnessing [low skill gaming] will make you speechless, if you are not the one playing. But if you are good, in the sense that all actions are seamlessly and fluently weaved into each other. Then you will enjoy the game a lot, and spectators will experience a smooth viewing experience.

The excerpt above encompass over 80% of what Ms YFWang said about her conceptualisation of gaming skill. Note that every example above involves some sort of spectatorship – watching other players or being observed. As such, it could be argued that her attention on skills in an everyday gaming context is not only underscored by the 'meritocratic' framing of gaming skill in online multiplayer games, but also stems from implicit peer pressure from being observed. In the excerpt above, she clearly indicates that she did not want to find herself on the other end of making spectators speechless with her lack of skill, as her roommate once did. Even though there was no indication of malicious intent behind her remarks, she nevertheless suggested that it could involve losing face. More importantly, her remarks suggest that spectating other players playing and being spectated while playing appeared to be common occurrences in her everyday gaming contexts. Although Ms YFWang is amongst the few participants who talked extensively about spectatorship in everyday gaming, all Chinese participants mentioned it to some extent, whereas none of their Western peers made mention of it. To understand why this was the case, we need to survey the difference between the space and time (spatial temporal condition) of Chinese participants' everyday gaming and that of their Western peers.

Skill and the Space and Time of Gaming

It should be remembered that the Chinese participants were interviewed shortly after they had arrived in the UK, which means that the gaming experiences being discussed primarily consisted of those they had experienced during their undergraduate studies. For undergraduate students, Chinese universities typically only offer shared accommodation instead of single rooms, while the latter are common in UK and most Western European countries. In Chinese university accommodation, a single room would usually be shared by at least four students. This means that the space and time in which the everyday gaming of Chinese participants took place would be rather different from those of their Western peers. Instead of each playing their own game in their private space, Chinese participants suggested that they usually played the same games with their roommates in shared spaces. Correlated to this, generally speaking, the Chinese participants in general seemed to play multiplayer games far more often than single-player ones. It also appeared that they prefer MOBA and MMO games in particular. Note that this does not mean that Western participants do not play multiplayer

games with their friends at all, however their remarks nevertheless indicate that playing with friends was not an everyday occurrences for Western participants, as it was for Chinese participants (which also matched my personal experience).

Indeed, gaming in shared physical space has been discussed in previous studies. For example, Thornham examined gaming in shared household (2011), Walkerdine investigated children's gaming in after-school clubs (2007), and gaming in 'PC bangs' of South Korean is also an often discussed subject (Stewart & Choi, 2003; Chee, 2006; Huhh, 2008). However, I argue the shared space and time for gaming for Chinese participants of this study is somewhat different. PC bangs is a semi-public space dedicated to gaming. In contrast, the university accommodation a Chinese participant shared with her roommates is much more private, as it is where the almost entirety of a Chinese participant's everyday life – except university courses – takes place. In other words, a Chinese participant's everyday gaming during term time usually took place in a place that is far more private and personal, albeit the space is shared. Furthermore, unlike the gaming in shared household discussed in Thornham's work (2011), or the after-school gaming clubs discussed in Walkerdine's work (2007), Chinese participants did not have the option to 'opt-out' – like it or not, if a Chinese university student wants to play games in their accommodation, she has to accept the fact that her highly personal and private leisure activity will take place in a shared space – a shared space where both her and her roommates' everyday lives take place.

Therefore, this shared space and time for gaming has two important implications. Firstly, as indicated in Ms YFWang's remarks, it leads to the ubiquity of spectatorship. Chinese participants' everyday gaming would often be spectated by their roommates, and they themselves would have ample opportunity to spectate others' everyday gaming activities. As such, this context adds a layer of public performance to the inherently personalised and individualised gaming activity and its private nature. And more importantly, the Chinese participants did not have a choice when they were in university accommodation if they wanted to play games during term time. It seemed that they had all come to terms with this, as none of them, female or male, mentioned any particular efforts to preserve the privacy of gaming when talking about their everyday gaming activities. Neither had the Chinese participants suggested that they would refine their single-player game gaming skills for the purpose of 'performing well for spectators' – even Ms YFWang. Although she clearly indicated that she considered being observed with low skill levels while gaming as something 'face-losing', she also said:

> [Whether skill is important is] dependent on what you are after in videogames. If the goal is to reach high scores or get all the achievements, gaming skill is of course important. But if you are only playing for sake of it, just to experience the game, nobody would care how bad you are at it. […] Gaming is after all just for relaxation/entertainment, do it in whatever way that makes oneself comfortable. If playing only for the sake of practice and developing a certain level of skill – having a sense of mission to it, it is too exhausting.

In the excerpts above, she suggested that, as underwhelming as a low skill gaming session would be for a spectator to watch, under normal circumstances – gaming in a personal and private setting, such as in one's own room – it should not concern a player. Because the ultimate purpose of gaming, according to my participants, including Ms YFWang, is for 'fun', not to show others how good she is. And, indeed, as she implies, gaming does not require a high skill level to be enjoyable. **CHAPTER 5** demonstrates that the 'flow' model reveals that the (enjoyment of) skill-based aspects of the gaming experience is determined by a player's self-perception of challenge level and skill level, which a player adjusts by setting up their own goals (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, c1997). On the other hand, as discussed in **CHAPTER 4** and **CHAPTER 5** the modern autonomous imaginative hedonist aspect of gaming will always remain enjoyable to a certain extent. However the shared living space turned all gaming activities into semi-public displays regardless of the player's own intentions. As such, a Chinese participant needs to either learn to become comfortable with the presence of spectators regardless of their in-game performance (in other words, to learn not to be concerned with 'losing face'), or to improve their skill(s) to a level at which they consider themselves to be sufficient for being observed anytime. More importantly, either approach will still constantly remind the player of the notion of skill.

The second implication of such a context for everyday gaming activity is that it also enables peer pressure from other players when a Chinese participant was playing with their roommates. The majority of Chinese participants suggested that they often played multiplayer games with their friends/roommates. In a competitive multiplayer game, a player would be either playing with her friends against other players or simply playing against her friends – although, according to the participants, the majority of the time they would be playing in the former manner. The peer pressure generated from playing competitively against friends is fairly straightforward: nobody wants to lose. Because of this, about one third of Chinese participants indicated that they would practice more in order to improve their gaming skill, as Mr YQLiu said:

> I will think about skill a lot when playing with others. Whenever I lost because of the lack of skill, I would felt the need for more practice. [It occurred] particularly commonly when I was playing more often, for example in high school and the first two years in university.

Over half of my Chinese participants indicated that, similar to playing competitively against their roommates, playing cooperatively with friends would still result in peer pressure for developing better gaming skill. A good example of such a scenario was described by Mr ZHZen:

> If you want to be good at gaming, gaming skill is of course very important. For example if you really sucks at online multiplayer games, your teammates will not be able to carry you even if they wanted to. But if you are only playing by yourself and just for the fun of it, sucking at games is not that big a deal. It depends on how and for what you are playing.

Note that in the excerpt above Mr ZHZen specifically highlights the ability of contributing to an online multiplayer gaming session as the reason why gaming skill would play a more significant role in such gaming activities. This is because if the player had a lower skill level than their teammates in cooperative gaming, not only would the player's own experience be less than optimal, it might also impact on their friends' experiences negatively, regardless of whether the team managed to emerge victorious from competitive play despite her relatively low skills. For the player, demonstrating a lower level of skill would already be less desirable in the 'meritocratic' framing of gaming skill in online-multiplayer games. Moreover, the goal of a multiplayer session is usually pre-determined: It is either a consensus amongst the players (in cases of cooperative play to overcome pre-determined challenges), or simply besting their opponents (in cases of competitive games). In either case, a player's capacity to adjust the goal to moderate their self-perception of challenge level and skill level is limited. As for her teammates, the goal of 'to win with a less skilled teammates' effectively increases the level of challenge, since doing so would require other players on the team to play with more effort and contribute more to compensate the less-than-ideal contribution of the less skilled player. As mentioned by Mr ZHZen in the excerpt above, in the online gaming community, doing this for teammates is termed 'carry', as in carrying the less skilled teammate on one's back. In this sense, 'being carried' connotes that, because of a lack of skill, the player is dragging others' enjoyment down. This further contributes to the implicit peer pressure of being less skilled, as the 'meritocratic' framing of gaming skill in online multiplayer games already automatically places a less skilled player lower on the hierarchy of players.

Moreover, the Chinese participants also suggested that 'usually plays with friends' does not mean 'always plays with friends'. From time to time, they would be playing online multiplayer games on their own. On the other hand, they typically did not 'only play with friends'. An online multiplayer session usually comprises two teams with 5 to 6 players on each side; it is unlikely that a team would comprise only of roommates/friends – my Chinese participants claimed that organising 5 friends/roommates to play at the same time was still a difficult task despite shared accommodation. Therefore, according to the Chinese participants, although they usually played online multiplayer games with their roommates or friends, it was also common to have two or more strangers on their teams. While friends or roommates typically would not mind 'carrying' their less skilled friend, one could not always expect the same from the strangers who happened to be playing together. Academics have noticed cases in which players have been abused and harassed because of perceptions that they are 'unskilled' (Schott & Horrell, 2000; Shen, et al, 2016; Paul, 2018), which Paul argues was enabled by the 'meritocratic' framing of skill (2018). This risk of being abused by strangers further serves to remind the player of the importance of gaming skill. Although this risk is not unique to the Chinese participants, it is nevertheless more prominent to them, simply because they were playing online multiplayer games far more often than single-player games.

Therefore, because of the space and time of Chinese participants' gaming experiences in their recent past, for them gaming skill was a more prominent factor in their everyday gaming, as articulated by Mr PHJi:

> I will [think about gaming skill even when playing]. Because I nevertheless made my way from a newbie, [I] was also insulted by others when performing poorly [back then]. That's why I prefer to play in my accommodation with my friends, [because] they sometimes would remind me of what to do. To be honest, I am not particularly fast at learning those things [spontaneously], being reminded repeatedly by them helped me to gradually develop attentions [to those issues]. Actually [I am] quite mindful of those things, because [you] don't want to be picked on [or insulted] while playing, [because it] does not really contribute to a good mood.

Here Mr PHJi highlights the three reasons why gaming skill as a concept was prominent in his everyday gaming: 1) he has mostly been playing online multiplayer games, and he has experienced the process of developing skill through practice – 'climbing the ladder', so to speak; 2) playing online multiplayer games runs the risk of receiving abusive messages when a player

underperforms; and 3) he usually plays with friends/roommates who would constantly observe his everyday gaming activities both in-game and outside game, reminding him about the further improvement of gaming skill. While none of the three aspects could be argued to be culturally unique, the combination of the market structure of the time and the shared accommodation of gaming space meant that the majority of my Chinese participants' recent gaming experiences primarily comprised these three conditions. Therefore, gaming skill as a concept played a more prominent role in Mr PHJi's everyday gaming activities in a more general sense, rather than just in the context of online multiplayer gaming sessions. Referring back to the notion of stratification, we can observe that the space and time of players' everyday gaming activities frames their understanding of the role of gaming skill in those activities as individual gaming sessions (stratum two), therefore contributing greatly to how players conceptualise gaming skill in the context of their everyday gaming (stratum three).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the process through which my participants understood the notion of gaming skill through the framework of stratification. Similar to the framework used in the previous two chapters, I identified three strata. The first stratum is to deduce the notion of gaming skill and its role through analysing videogame content. On this stratum, my participants indicated that they had in-depth and nuanced knowledge about the kinds of gaming skills that different types of videogames demand from them. In a more general sense, it seemed that they had different views on what abilities constituted gaming skill and what did not, or at the very least they had different views on what abilities contributed more to gaming skill. This problematizes attempts to measure gaming skill with a single universal metric.

The middle stratum conceptualises gaming skill in the context of an individual gaming session and its impact on a player's experience of such a gaming session. My participants suggested that not only are different gaming skills required for different types of games, but also that the importance of those different gaming skills also differs depending on the exact type of gaming. In particularly, they highlighted that gaming skill would have a larger impact on their experiences of online multiplayer sessions, but would not be as impactful on their single-player gaming sessions. I argue that one way to understand this is through the different framing of single-player gaming and multiplayer gaming. Whilst the former is a journey of self-realisation through reflexivity, the latter is often described as a digital playground where the more skilled a player is, the higher they will be in the hierarchy. Therefore, gaming skill plays

a more important role in the moment-to-moment gaming experience of online multiplayer games. This, I argue, calls for a more sophisticated approach – more sophisticated than just an indicator on the scale of 'good' to 'bad' – that allows for more nuanced input from players in discussions about the notion of gaming skill on this stratum.

The third stratum discusses the notion of gaming skill in the context of players' everyday gaming activities. By analysing the notable emphasis my Chinese participants put on gaming skill against the backdrop of their everyday gaming context, I demonstrated that players' conceptualisations of gaming skill is influenced by the space and time of gaming, as well as broader socio-cultural and economic factors such as market, because those factors largely inform what players play in their everyday gaming.

Taken together, my participants' remarks indicate that, similar to other concepts discussed in previous chapters, gaming skill is a sophisticated and nuanced concept. Players understand it through gaming against the backdrop of their everyday gaming activities, in terms of what, where, when, how, and why they play. In this sense, their notion of gaming skill resonates with what they understand as motivation for gaming and the activity of gaming. I will further discuss this in the next chapter.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Introduction

The eventual goal of this study was to develop a player-centric approach for understanding the player-videogame relationship, and this approach has indeed gradually emerged throughout this thesis. Simply put, a player-centric approach should: 1) start by understanding the player's experience; 2) focus on investigating how such experience is facilitated by the media content and technology in every-day gaming; and 3) take active notice of how such experience is further framed by a player's socio-cultural and economic contexts in non-essentialist ways.

In this final chapter I firstly re-address the individualised and private nature of gaming experiences through the notion of 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' – but this time beyond the immediate context of motivation, and relating it back to concepts such as gaming and skills. On this basis, I draw on stratification (of knowledge) to contest the common practice of conceptualising videogame players as postmodern subjects, arguing that videogames only facilitate the experience of gaming but do not dictate it. Following that, I propose that active efforts should be made to address the issue of (cultural) essentialism when studying non-central player demographics (namely non-white, non-Euro-American players). On this non-postmodernist and non-essentialist basis, I highlight three factors that should be taken into consideration when adopting a player-centric perspective. While doing so, I also highlight this study's three main contributions, namely: 1) a comprehensive theorisation of 'fun' as motivation for everyday gaming activities through notions of 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' and two-layered 'day-dream'; 2) a theoretical framework based on stratification (of knowledge) for examining the ontological nature of data in studies about videogame players; and 3) an outline for the methodology of a player-centric perspective on the videogame medium.

Personal Gaming

I began the discussion by examining my participants' accounts of their videogame purchases and acquisitions, an often overlooked aspect of a player's engagement with the videogame medium. Drawing on the Marxist notion of 'values', I demonstrated that, for my participants, videogame purchases and acquisitions are not just rooted in their needs and wants, but are also framed by their everyday socio-cultural and economic contexts, such as the videogame market structure, availability, media content about videogames, and the underlying ideology

of these factors. Furthermore, it appeared that my participants' remarks on their motivations for videogame purchases focused primarily on what I called the 'cultural value' – the socio-cultural value realised through playing with videogames – but not on the 'gaming value' – the value realised through gaming. This observation has two implications. On the one hand, it demonstrates that gaming is not the only aspect of the player-videogame relationship that is worthwhile for scholarly examination, and the discussion showed that videogame purchase and acquisition is just as meaningful and sophisticated. Indeed, phenomena such as pre-orders or backlog purchasing could be easily dismissed under the argument that consumer capitalism is only concerned with the never-ending expansion of consumption and production, but is not concerned with the actual use of the items being purchased. However, the participants clearly suggested that the thinking processes behind their purchasing decisions were deeply grounded in their everyday gaming activities, not simply indoctrinated by the underlying ideology of the industry. This is only more clearly seen when comparing the Chinese and Western participants' accounts of their videogame purchasing and acquisition. On the other hand, it also highlights the necessity for a player-centric approach that focuses on their everyday gaming activity and what such activity means to them – because we know players do not buy games just because consumer capitalism tells them to; we know that players buy games because they enjoy playing games, and because they are passionate about videogames. The question is how and why – namely what gaming-value is and how it is realised in everyday gaming. I proposed that one way of exploring this question is through three concepts: motivation, gaming, and gaming skill.

In **CHAPTER 4: MOTIVATION**, I argued that my participants' accounts of their motivation for playing videogames could be best understood through the notion of modern autonomous imaginative hedonism as theorised by Colin Campbell (1987, p. 78). Campbell argued that the enjoyment of modern hedonist activity stems from a person's capacity to mobilise existing materials provided by entertainment goods to construct their own 'day-dreams' in order to fulfil their own imagination by taking control over it. This notion resonates strongly with participants' remarks on why gaming is fun: because it provides digital playgrounds for games of make-believe, in which players can *directly interact* with others' imaginations as well as exercise their own. I argued that videogames are particularly effective in realising such hedonism because the digital reality of game-worlds allows the imaginations to present themselves in ways that are *perceived* to be unique to each individual player in ways that are visible, tangible and objective. In a sense, the videogame medium enables 'individuals to react subjectively to [the day-dreams]' not 'as if they were real', but because they are real – although

the reality is digital, not physical. I called this 'the first layer of "day-dream"'. This is the cornerstone that underscores the personal and subjective nature of the gaming experience. Participants noted that, while the number of interactive choices players can make is certainly limited, the choices were nevertheless *made by themselves* after (often) careful planning and thinking, so that the game-world would unfold in ways to their liking. Regardless of the eventual result, the process of gaming is indeed 'autonomous'. This investment that videogames demand from players renders the experience uniquely personal. Even players who interact with a game in exactly the same way use thinking processes that vary from one to another.

Herein lies what I consider to be this study's first notable theoretical contribution. More specifically, 'fun' is not explained through concepts that were developed for analysing moment-to-moment play experiences. Instead, 'fun' is understood as motivation for everyday gaming activity – namely taking the participants' perspective, and discussing it as a concept in-and-of itself. This approach to 'fun', to my knowledge, has rarely been attempted in previous studies about videogame players. While existing literature tends to focus on the question 'what makes a videogame fun', this study explores 'what fun players see in their everyday engagement with videogames'. Success in taking the participants' perspective and analysing 'fun' as motivation for everyday gaming is important for two reasons. Firstly, I demonstrated that 'fun' as a concept – as vague as it may seem – is not a throw-away descriptor and is worth further exploration in-and-of itself, and such exploration lays foundations for further analyses of motivation and beyond. Secondly, it validates the player-centric, grounded approach this study advocates. Taken together, this enables further in-depth analyses of concepts such as gaming and skill in a similar player-centric approach.

In **CHAPTER 5: GAMING**, I illustrated the individualised, personalised and private nature of gaming expressed by my participants by examining their remarks on their everyday gaming activities against the newer iteration of the 'flow' model. Through the newer iteration of the 'flow' model, my participants revealed that what makes the skill-based aspect of the moment-to-moment gaming experience personal and private to them is not the 'objectively measurable' challenge-skill ratio, but their own perceptions of the level of challenge in relation to their self-perception of (their own) gaming skill. Both (self-) perceptions of skill level and challenge level are constructed against the backdrop of their own preferences and past gaming experience. Moreover, these perceptions can be further moderated by the goals of each individual gaming session, which, according to my participants and the newer iteration of the 'flow' model, are informed by the videogames but ultimately determined by the players for themselves – again, against the backdrop of their own preferences and past gaming

experience. As such, the skill-based aspect of gaming is also experienced in highly personalised and individualised ways in moment-to-moment, individual gaming sessions. I further demonstrated the synergy between the 'flow' model and the notion of 'day-dream' of 'modern autonomous imaginative', and the combination of the two theoretical frameworks could bring insights into the strong sense of privacy my participants expressed when talking about their everyday gaming: it is not just rooted in the private nature of 'day-dream', but is also found in how the skill-based aspect is experienced. Furthermore, I argued that the skill-based aspect is not experienced alongside the 'day-dream', but is folded into it, hence further enhancing the sense of privacy within it.

In **CHAPTER 6: GAMING SKILL**, I discussed the two different neoliberal framings that could help to better understand my participants' remarks on the concept of gaming skill: the journey to 'autarkic human self' was emphasised more in their remarks about gaming skill in single-player games, and 'meritocracy' was addressed more often when discussing gaming skill for multiplayer games. When talking about gaming skill in single-player games, my participants suggested that it is developed through an introspective journey to become the 'autarkic human self' of gaming, which is being able to deal with whatever challenge the game can provide. This is an intensely personal and private process, because it demands constant reflection on a player's own 'inadequacies' in terms of gaming skill. In the second framing, a multiplayer game is usually presented as a playground where the hierarchy amongst players is determined by gaming skill, while the videogames themselves offer little challenge. Since playing against other players and besting them in head-to-head competition becomes the main goal of moment-to-moment gaming, having higher level gaming skill will help a player to achieve such a goal. Meanwhile, the 'meritocratic' framing of online multiplayer games turns gaming skill into something more than just 'the ability to overcome challenges', and is also what determines a player's status in the hierarchy of the player community (within a given multiplayer game). Thus the personal and private nature of gaming skill is not just because it is developed through practise that takes time and efforts, but also because gaming skill is a 'metric' through which a player would be valued in the gaming culture. However, by arguing that the player-videogame relationship is personalised, individualised, and private is not to imply that somehow a player's use and meaning-making of videogames is an unpredictable process that defies academic interrogation. Rather, it is to emphasise the importance of understanding the everyday context in which the player-videogame relationship

is constructed. This should be considered in developing a player-centric perspective on videogames – I will demonstrate this by contesting two common epistemological and methodological stances often taken in the study of videogames and players.

Problems with Essentialism

The last issue I want to reflect on is the notion of a player's cultural/social background in relation to the notion of essentialism. Essentialism is not an inherently bad practise in the realm of everyday life (Gelman, 2003) or in the realm of natural science (Ellis, 2001). However, essentialism in the context of Media Studies has a rather specific meaning: it refers to the practice of attributing observed differences in the media-audience relationship (such as usage, experiences, or meaning-making) between two groups of audiences ***solely*** based on the most obvious attribute(s) that differentiate one from another (such as gender, nationality, sexuality, or ethnicity), but *without* addressing the political structure underlying such attribute(s). Simply put, essentialism (in the context of Media Studies) essentialises those attributes *and* takes them for granted. The problem is that such attributes are always developed from sophisticated social-political-economic struggles and always remains in flux – even though such attributes are often constructed upon and signified by certain relatively stable biological factors, such as sex or skin colour (Madianoun, 2011; Grillo, 2003; Narayan, 1998).

Although the underlying assumption about the player demographic is indeed shifting away from 'white male adolescents' to an overall less well-defined demographic, studies of players and videogames are still very much centred on the Euro-American context. As a non-Westerner myself, the few occasions in which academic attention have been paid to players outside the 'centre' often appear to be guided by the intention of 'finding differences', rather than carefully deployed attempts at understanding politically marginalised players. In a way, these attempts read like 'expeditions into the unknown', which only seek to document some 'curious' differences phenomenologically, simply attributing differences to 'cultural background' without actually asking 'how'. In a way, non-Euro-American players are often presented as mysterious people who do 'funny' things with videogames, because we are somehow culturally different. This implies a sense of 'othering', albeit without overtly malicious intent[37].

[37] A good example of such 'well-meant othering' is the edited volume of *Gaming Cultures and Place in Asia-Pacific* (Ed. Hjorth & Chan, 2009).

This study, however, sought a different approach to cultural differences. As mentioned in the introduction, this study used an audience-centric methodology that did not integrate any presumptions about the socio-cultural backgrounds of its participants. The result is telling: throughout all of the preceding chapters, it should have been made obvious that the differences between different cultural/gender groups were rather subtle. Moreover, those differences seemed to be rooted in a wide array of cultural and socio-economic factors, such as market structure or the industries' priorities. In other words, and in keeping with the arguments of scholars like Madianoun (2011) and Clough (1998), the thinking process that led to those differences appeared to be far more nuanced and sophisticated on an individual and personal level, rather than simply dictated by the nationality or gender.

In the meantime, essentialism could stifle discussions in both ways. Indeed, falling into the trap of essentialism could lead to crude and unsophisticated representations of the perceived 'others', but a too aggressive denial of it would instead result in intentional ignorance towards the socio-political context of the non-centric demographic. As Madianou points out:

> The threat of essentialism, however, can in its extreme form lead to a research paralysis. Moreover, the acknowledgement that difference can (and has been) manipulated should not make us deny difference altogether, as this would risk colluding with problematic views which refuse the recognition of minority rights to those who feel difference. (2011, p. 447)

As Madianou points out, a non-essentialist approach does not mean denying that delineators such as gender, socio-cultural background, or previous gaming experiences, do not play a crucial role in shaping the player-videogame relationship. As demonstrated in previous chapters, those factors anchor the participants' meaning-making of their relationship with the videogame medium in terms of purchases, gaming, and skill(s). However, as demonstrated in **CHAPTER 3: VIDEOGAME ACQUISITION** and **CHAPTER 6: GAMING SKILL**, the differences between the two groups of participants (Chinese and Western) are not simply because of their different nationalities or personal preferences, but rooted in their everyday gaming practices that have been shaped by their social, cultural, and economic backgrounds – the core experiences of gaming (and therefore the 'basis' of meaning-making of the activity of gaming) seemed to be shared. This is particularly notable in the prominence of the concept of gaming skill discussed in the last chapter, where I demonstrated how the different videogame market structures and different accommodation conditions in universities contributed to noticeably different conceptualisations of gaming skill between my Chinese and Western participants.

This not only echoes Madianou's (2011) assertion, that an audience-centric approach with an emphasis on media experiences is essential to avoid the pitfall of essentialism, but also indicates that to more accurately theorise the role of those delineators demands in-depth understanding of the everyday socio-cultural and political contexts in which those delineators exist – my own cultural background provides this in-depth understanding for this study.

This calls back to the argument I made in the last section: acknowledging the individualised and personalised nature of gaming experience is not to deny the role a player's socio-political background plays in shaping their use and meaning-making of videogames. Losing sight of the nuanced ways through which the socio-cultural and political contexts that contribute to the process will lead to the type of research paralysis discussed in Madianou's excerpt above: writing off observed differences as 'different individualised and personalised meaning-making processes' is to deny the very real and tangible impacts a player's socio-cultural and political background has on their relationship with the videogame medium. To avoid such pitfalls, audiences (and players) should be conceptualised as living, breathing human beings, not simply as representatives of certain groups – or consumers of certain products, which is the second common methodological stance I intend to contest with this study: the postmodern conceptualisation of the videogame medium through the notion of a 'virtual world'.

Re-grounding the Game-world

I have consciously avoided using the phrase 'virtual world' throughout this thesis, using 'digital world' instead due to the connotations of the 'virtual world'. Although the etymology of the phrase might suggest otherwise, 'virtual world' is practically used in the sense that implies game-worlds are not-real – hence the antonymic phrase 'real world'. In general, I consider this proposition of 'virtual world' to be particularly debatable. Conceptualising videogames as 'virtual worlds', first and foremost, justifies the tendency to constrain the scope of research to the games themselves. Even player studies tend to limit themselves to investigating players from perspectives that are within the games. After all, what is the point of seeing beyond the game-worlds, if it has no bearing on 'reality'?

Moreover, conceptualising games as 'not-real' – inadvertently or not – advocates a rather dangerous proposition: to idealise the videogame medium as the epitome of post-modern sensibility. On the surface, not only are videogames perfect embodiments of simulacrum in Baudrillard's terms (1994, p. 6) – the digital nature of videogames renders every single object, as well as the rules in videogames, 'copies without origin (p. 1)'. Since the idea of a 'virtual world' implies that game-worlds have no bearing on 'reality', videogames could constitute

'simulations'. Following this logic, the reality of the game-world is the perfect 'hyperreality': for Baudrillard this is a 'reality' that is entirely constructed by simulacra, a mere simulation that appears more 'real' than the actual reality. Therefore, we are not able to tell 'hyperreality' from the actual reality. Naturally, a radical claims such as this have a wide range of socio-cultural and political implications; particularly relevant for the experience of 'hyperreality' is Baudrillard's claim that 'hyperreality' grants media the power of overriding an individual's subjectivity, turning an audience of 'hyperreality' into 'a pure screen a pure absorption and re-absorption surface of the influent networks' (1988, p. 27). Simply put, to Baudrillard, in 'hyperreality' not only is it impossible for a person to tell what is real and what is not, but they can also do nothing but absorb and regurgitate all the information and influences fed to them by the 'hyperreality'.

Obviously, if this analogy was to be accepted, the study of videogame audiences (players) would be limited to an even more constrained scope, if not deemed outright pointless: since all experiences are essentially copies of each other, all we need to do to make claims about the player-videogame relationship is to observe how players behave in the game-worlds regardless of physical contexts. Or, in more radical cases, simply make conjectures about how players would behave, even feel, based on 'analysing' the media content[38]. In many ways, this post-modernist logic is precisely what much stigma around videogames and players are grounded upon, outside or within academia, most noticeably regarding the impact that videogames have on players. In terms of claims made by academics about the videogame medium's influences on players, Ferguson points out these are usually inferred from behavioural data in disregard of both the specific contexts in which they were gathered and the socio-cultural backgrounds of players (2007)[39]. He further demonstrates that gaming experience, when examined against the backdrop of the materiality in which it takes place, is far more sophisticated and nuanced than analyses of videogame content could predict (Ferguson, 2010; Ferguson & Olson, 2012).

In this study, I have demonstrated that the same could be said about the players' experiences of, and their relationships with, the videogame medium. Players react to and act on videogames in their own ways, which are informed by their personal beliefs, preferences, the material reality they live in, and the moment-to-moment context, such as emotion and their

[38] As briefly discussed in the introduction, the act of gaming/play is often inferred rather than investigated.

[39] Granted, academia is indeed growing increasingly wary of investigating the influences of violence in videogames (exemplified by the American Psychological Association's 2015 report).

surroundings. In other words, the videogame medium is understood subjectively through highly temporally and spatially individualised gaming experiences, against each player's personal socio-cultural and economic backdrop. Therefore, neither the experience of gaming nor the player-videogame relationship shall, or can, be assumed in a post-modernist fashion, because they are neither unified nor individualised to an extent that is beyond theorisation. Meanwhile, this study also shed light on the nature of videogames: they frame how a player experiences the videogame medium, but do not dictate it, hence videogames should not and cannot be theorised as post-modernist media artefacts. Indeed, as Silverstone points out, the postmodernist view is a theoretical oversimplification of a highly complex and nuanced reality:

> [In contrast to the postmodernist view of media audiences], we know, if only maybe of ourselves, that we can and do distinguish between fantasy and reality, that we can and do preserve some critical distance between ourselves and our media, that our vulnerabilities to media influence or persuasion are uneven and unpredictable, that there are differences between watching, understanding, accepting, believing in and acting on or out, that we test out what we see and hear against what we know or believe, that we ignore or forget much of it anyway, and that our responses to media, both in particular and in general, vary by individual and across social groups, according to gender, age, class, ethnicity, nationality, as well as across time. (1999, p. 9)

Silverstone's criticism of the postmodernist view of the media audience reminds us of the standpoint that this study started with: to investigate the player-videogame relationship from the player's own perspective in the context of a player's everyday life. Only by doing so could we observe how audiences 'distinguish between fantasy and reality', the means through which they 'preserve some critical distance' between themselves and media, because only then could we properly theorise the role that 'social groups' play without losing sight of the individualised and personalised nature of media experiences. It should be noted, however, that what Silverstone describes is an ontological stance, whereas realising it in an interview-based study would require a methodology that could both comprehensively account for all the different aspects of the audience/players' accounts on different types of media use and not lose sight of the context of the media use as well as the media themselves. In this study, I have demonstrated that this audience/player-centric approach could be best realised through a methodology anchored by the notion of 'stratification (of knowledge)'.

Stratification

Stratification of knowledge is a concept that this study leans heavily on to examine participants' accounts of the concepts of motivation, gaming, and gaming skill. **CHAPTER 4: MOTIVATION** argues that the notion of stratification of knowledge serves a very similar function to other concepts such as Kuhn's incommensurability (Kuhn, 1962, c2012; Kuhn, 2000), which is often seen as a way to discuss the differences between scientific paradigms (Sankey, 1993). The notion of stratification used in this study has its roots in Bhaskar's work, which was developed to observe the constant object of discussion and how it transcends through different scientific perspectives (2008, p. 161)

The particular version of this notion is adapted from Collier's iteration of Bhaskar's stratification. It focuses on the inter-stratum relations, which is one of the more notable aspects that are glossed over in Bhaskar's work (Collier, 1994, p. 131). In this sense, Collier's understanding of stratification moves further away from tasks such as finding the rigid boundaries between strata, but more towards the goal of understanding how the knowledge transcends through strata. This is crucial in the case of my project, because its goal is to develop a player-centric approach to the videogame medium, not just to understand the different ways that players talk about videogames. Drawing on Collier's version of stratification (of knowledge), I propose the following model to stratify the different ways that the player-videogame relationship can be discussed through the lenses of motivation, gaming, and skill (as shown in **CHAPTER 4**):

TABLE 1: STRATIFICATION OF KNOWLEDGE APPLIED TO THE CONCEPTS OF MOTIVATION, GAMING, AND SKILL

	Motivation	Gaming	Skill
Stratum One	Motivation deduced from analysing videogame content	Particular way of gaming deduced from analysing videogame content	Gaming skill deduced from analysing videogame content
Stratum Two	Motivation for moment-to-moment gaming and in-game activities	Things players do in moment-to-moment gaming	Gaming skill player use in moment-to-moment gaming

Stratum Three	Motivation for gaming in an everyday context	Gaming as direct engagement with the videogame medium in an everyday context	Gaming skill as one concept in an everyday context

Most notably, Collier argues that there are three relationships between the strata. The first is 'ontological presupposition' – some stratum could not exist without the other(s) (1994, p. 131). The second is 'non-transitive vertical explanation' – one stratum can explain its neighbour, but does not explain strata that are further apart (1994, p. 131). The third principle is 'composition', by which Collier means that if a stratum is ontologically presupposed by other stratum or strata, it would be composed by elements of the stratum or those strata (1994, p. 132).

For example, through the notion of stratification, we can immediately see where the problem – or challenge – lies in applying the postmodernist view of understanding the player-videogame relationship. Indeed, such knowledge is invaluable as it helps us to understand the ontological nature of videogames as media artefacts. However, focusing on videogame content generates knowledge that only pertains to the first stratum and their principles ('ontological presupposition' and 'composition') remind us that the knowledge on the first stratum can help us to explain what we observe on the second stratum (moment-to-moment gaming), but cannot replace the actual knowledge on the second stratum. This is because the moment-to-moment gaming always takes place in the physical world, where a range of different factors would have an impact on the players. And none of those factors could be adequately addressed by analysing the digital worlds of videogames. Furthermore, the second principle ('non-transitive vertical explanation') reminds us that analyses about the games cannot directly contribute to discussion about the player-videogame relationship in an everyday context, but only through explaining moment-to-moment gaming activities.

I have demonstrated that the notion of stratification could be applied to both data in existing studies about players and my participants' remarks (on the topics of motivation, gaming, and skill), which in turn not only enables me to better understand data collected for this study, but also to utilise this model to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of existing paradigms and previous studies. The latter function is particularly noteworthy, as it enables a previously rarely attempted approach for a meta-literature review – most previous meta-

literature reviews typically examine certain meso-level theoretical concepts, which are concepts that describe tangible issues [such as negative effect (Ferguson, 2007), immersion (Calleja, 2011), and 'active audience' (Behrenshausen, 2012)]. Whereas this approach concentrates on macro-level concepts by examining their epistemological nature, which is to say it aims to theorise the body of knowledge a study contributes to, and its relation to other studies and the existing corpus of knowledge about players. This is why I consider this iteration of stratification (of knowledge) to be the second notable theoretical contribution of this study.

For the purpose of this study – developing a player-centric perspective on videogames – this framework (and the three principles) speak directly to the methodological inspirations of this study (Couldry's 'practice theory' [2014] in particular) by providing a rigid structure to not only categorise my participants' remarks on motivation, gaming, and skill, but also to more precisely theorise how their remarks relate to each other whilst speaking to the concept of videogame-player relations in an everyday context. This helps to address the more vague aspect of the theoretical position of 'focusing on the everyday media use' (such as Couldry's 'practice theory'), which is that it does not provide explicit theorisation about some arguably fundamental distinctions, such as that between 'audience perception of media content' and 'audience media use', or between 'everyday moment-to-moment media use' and 'media use in an everyday context' as a concept in its entirety. By combining both, we can illuminate the path towards a player-centric perspective on the videogame medium, which is what I regard as the third major contribution of this study. I will discuss this further in the next section.

Towards a Player-centric Perspective on the Videogame Medium

First of all, as discussed in **CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**, an audience-centric perspective of media helps to understand the everyday media practice. This study has demonstrated that this argument also applies to a player-centric perspective on the videogame medium, which is to say a player-centric perspective on the videogame medium requires us to investigate how the videogame medium is engaged by a player in their everyday life, and how they understand such an engagement in the context of their everyday life – an everyday life that is social, cultural, political, and physically real. To do so is to reject the postmodernist assumption of videogames being 'virtual worlds' where physical reality has no bearing. To do so is also to comprehensively address how the players' understandings vary 'by individual and across social groups, according to gender, age, class, ethnicity, nationality, as well as across time' (Silverstone, 1999, p. 5) without falling into the trap of essentialism.

Both could be achieved through investigating players' everyday gaming experiences. Therefore, 'investigating the payers' everyday gaming experiences' is where a player-centric perspective should start, not conclude. This leads to the second methodological reorientation.

Secondly, the notion of stratification also helps us to better understand how to approach players' perceptions of videogame content, a more commonly focus of previous player-centric studies of the videogame medium. The stratification model indicates that players' perceptions of videogame content reside on the first stratum, which could only explain their everyday gaming experiences. Therefore, a player-centric perspective that aims to understand the player-videogame relationship in an everyday context should focus on how players' experience is facilitated by the content of the videogame medium through players' own interactions with such content, and not just on how players experience or perceive the content. Although not discussed in this thesis, participants certainly paid substantial attention to the representations as well as the rule-systems in individual videogames, and they also actively engaged in the process of closely inspecting the representation and (concurrently) learning the rule-system through interactively experimenting with a game-world. Yet doing so is a means to an end, because understanding the game-world is necessary for players to be able to play the game of make-believe in their own ways: on one hand, it is a matter of personal preference for specific presentation or gameplay; on the other hand, the challenge-based nature of videogames requires players to have a certain understanding of the intended experience to enjoy. In either case, it should be immediately obvious that, as asserted above, players paying attention to and learning about the game-worlds do so only so that they can interact with those digital worlds in ways that best realise their preferred gaming experience. In other words, although play is built upon a player's perception of videogames, the purpose it serves is not always explicitly associated with either gameplay or representation. Taken together, as odd as it may sound, it appears that videogames are experienced as videogames first and foremost, rather than as gameplay or as representation – or as a combination of both. Indeed, the videogame medium is the only entertainment medium where perception is only the mere beginning of everyday moment-to-moment use. Therefore, a player-centric approach examining how videogames are played, and played with in everyday context, is necessary to avoid falling into the postmodernist trap.

Thirdly, the notion of stratification helps us to better understand the final goal of a player-centric perspective on the videogame medium, which is to theorise the player-videogame relationship. As such, understanding a player's moment-to-moment gaming experience is where a player-centric perspective should start, but not conclude, even when investigating

players' experiences of specific games. This is because 'videogame medium in an everyday context' is on the third stratum, whereas the player's moment-to-moment experience resides on the second stratum. Therefore everyday moment-to-moment gaming experience explains the role that the videogame medium plays in a player's everyday life, but does not directly translate to the latter. For example, as discussed in **CHAPTER 4: MOTIVATION**, my participants' remarks on the overall motivation for gaming were made without any reference to specific games. In turn, it seems that, for the participants, the game-worlds of videogames (rule-systems and representations) are vehicles to transport them to their desired gaming experience, not the destination. Thus, a player-centric approach should seek players' remarks that directly speak to this stratum but not only focus on their accounts of moment-to-moment gaming experiences. As demonstrated throughout the thesis, as well as in Thornham's study (2011), players are more than capable of providing nuanced and insightful remarks on the role that the videogame medium (or any specific game) plays in their everyday lives – after all, players are the ultimate expert of the topic of the player-videogame relationship, as they maintain this relationship in their everyday lives. By the same token, however, more general enquiries cannot replace meticulous examination of player's everyday moment-to-moment gaming experiences. As demonstrated in **CHAPTER 5: GAMING** and in **CHAPTER 6: GAMING SKILL**, to adequately theorise the player-videogame relationship in an everyday context is also to explain those more general remarks from players through their everyday moment-to-moment gaming experiences – only by doing so could we avoid the traps of essentialism.

Taken together, I argue that a player-centric perspective on the videogame medium should focus on investigating the videogame medium's role in players' everyday lives – the lived, socio-cultural and political everyday lives that take place in the physical world. To achieve this goal, we must understand: 1) how videogames are perceived by players as media artefacts; 2) how players use videogames to facilitate the types of gaming experiences that they desire against their socio-cultural and political backgrounds; and 3) the theory behind the role of the videogame medium in players' everyday lives based on those uses as they happen in the physical world. Simply put, a player-centric perspective on the videogame medium – or a piece of videogame content – should always aim to address all three strata in synchronicity – players' perceptions of videogames, players' everyday uses of videogames, and players' conceptualisations of the roles that videogames play in their everyday lives, either through interviews or other methods.

Concluding Thoughts: The Videogame Medium through the Lenses of Motivation, Play, and Skills

Finally, I address the three main concepts, motivation, play, and skills, and their role in this proposed player-centric approach. In my view, these concepts are not strictly theoretically defined; rather, they are loosely assembled notions, and each offers a unique scope through which we can investigate the player-videogame relationship: motivation addresses the needs, wants, and desires that motivate players to 'do things' with the videogame medium; play addresses the 'things players do' with the videogame medium; and skills addresses the abilities that are required by the games and mobilised by the players when 'doing things' with the videogame medium in an attempt to meet their needs, wants, and desires. This approach will also serve such a purpose in studies with a relatively narrow scope, for example through a notable recent event in Western gaming culture: loot-boxes.

Monetisation methods in videogames have been a point of contention amongst players and scholars alike. Since 2014, mainstream games publishers broke micro-transactions out from free-to-play games, and implemented them in mainstream, triple-A releases. Before the dust was even settled on this matter, the industry began implementing a more controversial monetisation method: purchasable 'loot-boxes', which always contain randomised items. Some of the 'loot-boxes' contain only cosmetic items, whereas the others also contain items that offer game-play advantages, for example weapons that deal more damage. More recently (late 2017), 'loot-boxes' as a monetisation method and their gambling-like randomised nature have caught the attention of the mainsteam media and legislation bodies, due to their inclusion in a tie-in game of the **STAR WARS** multi-media franchise. 'Loot-boxes' sparked an uproar amongst the gaming community, accusing it of being a 'glorified gambling gimmick' and/or a 'pay-to-win system'. Meanwhile, the industry defends this monetisation method by claiming that it offers players' 'choice' between paying additional money and 'grinding'[40]

A player-centric perspective with foci on motivation, play, and skills offers scope to investigate 'loot-boxes' in the context of player-videogame relations, as each concept points towards topics that could/should be examined from the players' perspective. Motivation addresses the concern that 'loot-boxes' aim to motivate players through elements beyond the experience of gaming and acquiring the randomised 'loot' by mimicking the mechanism of

[40]For further details see: https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-01-31-what-ea-is-and-isnt-saying-about-microtransactions-returning-to-star-wars-battlefront-2, last accessed 23/03/18.

gambling (and therefore replicating its allure). Play addresses the actual use of 'loot-boxes' in everyday gaming and its impact on the experience of gaming. Skills speaks to the core problem raised by the gaming community regarding the purchasable 'loot-boxes', that with their gambling-like mechanism they have 'de-skilled' gaming. On one hand, the content of 'loot-boxes' is generated randomly by pre-determined algorithms, just like gambling, and no gaming skill is involved. A 'loot-box' earned by less-skilled gaming offers the exact same randomised content as a 'loot-box' obtained through high-skilled gaming. This conflicts with the videogame medium's principle of 'rewarding players proportional to the level of skills displayed'. On the other hand, and more importantly, 'loot-boxes' can be purchased with additional money to entirely circumvent the skill requirement. As such, through the angles of motivation, play, and skill, we are able to investigate the matter of 'loot-boxes' in videogames in ways that directly speak to the socio-cultural and political nature of such in-game mechanisms.

Overall, this thesis has demonstrated that the videogame medium is used and understood by players' as a socio-cultural and political object. Therefore, if we are to understand the videogame medium from the perspective of players, we must employ an approach that is capable of understanding the socio-cultural and political nature of such use and understanding. Furthermore, to adequately investigate the socio-cultural and political nature of videogame use and players' understanding requires us to sufficiently understand the socio-cultural and political context in which the use takes place and the understanding is constructed. The videogame medium is always in flux; the consumer-capitalism driven industry is taking full advantage of the medium's digital nature and seeks to constantly innovate hardware, contents, distribution methods, and monetisation methods, whereas the 'player' is an element that is relatively consistent in comparison. But to take advantage of the relative consistency of the 'player' element in research, we need player-centric approaches that actually understand what the notion of 'player' means – which is a living, breathing human being who plays videogames with their own thoughts, needs, and wants; but also a human being who plays videogames in the material world that is socio-cultural and political.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Games Mentioned

Videogame	Year	Developer	Publisher
Bayonetta 2	2014	Platinum Games	Nintendo
Borderlands: The Handsome Collection	2015	Gearbox Software; Armature Studio; Iron Galaxy Studios	2K Games
Candy Crush Saga	2012-	King	King
Dark Souls II	2013	From Software	Bandai Namco
Dota 2	2013-	Valve Corporation	Valve Corporation
Far Cry 3	2012	Ubisoft Montreal	Ubisoft
Final Fantasy Type-0 HD	2015	Square Enix Business Division 2; Hexa Drive	Square Enix
Hearthstone	2014-	Blizzard Entertainment	Blizzard Entertainment
Jian Xia Qing Yuan Online III	2009	Xishanju	Jinshan
League of Legends	2009-	Riot Games	Riot Games
Legend of Zelda: Windwaker HD	2013	Nintendo	Nintendo
Mario Kart 8	2014	Nintendo EAD	Nintendo
Mortal Kombat X	2015	NetherRealm Studios	Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
Overwatch	2016-	Blizzard Entertainment	Blizzard Entertainment
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney [Franchise]	2003-	Capcom	Capcom
Pokémon X/Y	2013	Game Freak	Nintendo; The Pokémon Company
Rise of The Tomb Raider	2015	Crystal Dynamic	Square Enix
Second Life	2003-	Linden Research, Inc	Linden Research, Inc

STATE OF DECAY	2013	Undead Labs	Microsoft Studios
SUPER MARIO BROS	1985	Nintendo Creative Development Systems Research and Development	Nintendo
THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE	2014-	ZeniMax Online Studios	Bethesda Softworks
THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM	2011	Bethesda Game Studios	Bethesda Softworks
THE LAST OF US	2013	Naughty Dog	Sony Computer Entertainment
THE SIMS [FRANCHISE]	2000-	Maxis	Electronic Arts
THE WALKING DEAD	2013	Telltale Games	Telltale Games
UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES	2009,2015	Naughty Dog	Sony Computer Entertainment
WIND FANTASY [FRANCHISE]	1999-	Fun Yours Technology	Unistar
WORLD OF WARCRAFT	2004-	Blizzard Entertainment	Blizzard Entertainment

Appendix 2: List of Participants

Name	Gender	Game Played	Nationality	Age
BHawke	F	Bayonetta	British	Early-mid 20
LToad	F	Mario Kart 8	British	Early-mid 20
OJeffery	F	NA	British	Early-mid 20
SSheb	F	Windwaker	British	Early-mid 20
SSylvanas	F	The Last of Us	British	Late 20 - Early 30
ALink	M	Windwaker	British	Late 20 - Early 30
ARed	M	Windwaker	British	Early-mid 20
ATKBoo	M	Dark Souls 2	British	Early-mid 20
Billy	M	Bayonetta	British	Early-mid 20
DCRedfield	M	Bayonetta	British	Early-mid 20
DSonic	M	Dark Souls 2	British	Late 20 - Early 30
EFez	M	Dark Souls 2	British	Mid-late 20
J.C. Dento	M	NA	British	Early-mid 20
JDante	M	Dark Souls 2	British	Mid-late 20
JStanley	M	NA	British	Early-mid 20
LJason	M	Dark Souls 2	British	Mid-late 20
MLeon	M	NA	British	Early-mid 20
PSFisher	M	The Last of Us	British	Early-mid 20
RMentat	M	Age of Empire 2	British	Mid-late 20
AOlimar	F	Bayonetta 2	British Chinese	Early-mid 20
ANathen	M	The Last of Us	British/American Indian	Early-mid 20
TKratos	m	The Last of Us	British/Zimbabwean	Early-mid 20
DYXu	F	The Last of Us	Chinese	Early-mid 20
HNDuan	F	Candy Crush	Chinese	Early-mid 20
JJiang	F	The Last of Us	Chinese	Early-mid 20
JTDing	F	Windwaker	Chinese	Early-mid 20
SLiang	F	Transistor	Chinese	Early-mid 20
XLYong	F	The Last of Us	Chinese	Early-mid 20
YDLyu	F	The Last of Us	Chinese	Early-mid 20
YFWang	F	The Last of Us	Chinese	Early-mid 20
YTong	F	The Last of Us	Chinese	Early-mid 20
BZHGuo	M	The Last of Us	Chinese	Early-mid 20
Dwang	M	The Last of Us	Chinese	Early-mid 20
GCHXu	M	The Last of Us	Chinese	Early-mid 20
PHJi	M	The Last of Us	Chinese	Early-mid 20
QWang	M	The Last of Us	Chinese	Early-mid 20
RZDing	M	The Last of Us	Chinese	Early-mid 20
SHGao	M	The Last of Us	Chinese	Early-mid 20
XHChi	M	The Last of Us	Chinese	Early-mid 20
YQLiu	M	The Last of Us	Chinese	Early-mid 20
ZHZen	M	The Last of Us	Chinese	Early-mid 20
HLai	F	Dark Souls 2	Chinese (Hongkongness	Early-mid 20
KFreddie	F	The Last of Us	Filipina	Early-mid 20
SLaura	F	Windwaker	German	Early-mid 20
JJohn	M	Dark Souls 2	German	Early-mid 20
AReiko	F	Windwaker	Japanese	Early-mid 20
RNinja	M	Windwaker	Japanese	Early-mid 20
APart 34	M	Dark Souls 2	Moroccan/Emirian	Early-mid 20
SSoso	M	Bayonetta/Vanquish	Saudi Arabic	Early-mid 30

Appendix 3: Consent Form Sample

CONSENT FORM

Consent to take part in Play, Skills and Motivation

	Add your initials next to the statement if you agree
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet/ dated 14/01/2015 explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions or to take part in any particular activity or activities, I am free to decline.	
I understand that if I choose to withdraw, I can also require having all data generated by me destroyed. If I want to withdraw, I understand I need to let Yinyi Luo know in writing. I also understand that once this study is completed, it will be impossible for my data to be located because it will be anonymised.	
I agree not to disclose any detail of focus group discussion I participant without other participants' permission in respect of others.	
I give permission for Yinyi Luo to use my responses for the research purposes of his PhD and related publications (articles, conference papers). I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential.	

I agree to take part in the above research project, as activities described in the attached information sheet and will inform Yinyi Luo should my contact details change.	

Name of participant	
Participant's signature	
Date	
Name of lead researcher	Yinyi Luo 罗殷逸
Signature	
Date*	

*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant.

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/ pre-written script/ information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents which must be kept in a secure location.

Appendix 4: Information Sheet Sample

INFORMATION SHEET

Thank you for reading this Information Sheet. This sheet will tell you what my study is about and what we are going to do if you decided to participate (and what fun we are going to have). Please read this before you move on to the consent form.

1. **What this study is about?**

In this study I am trying to understand how we, the players, make sense of video-games and play. Videogames are meant to be played, and play is how we players make sense of videogames. We play differently – not only we play different games, but we literally play in different ways. Others play alone and you play with your mates; others play on PC and you play on consoles. Do you think those who play differently would understand the games differently? Have you ever had a discussion with you fellow players about what which game is the best ever made? Will you agree with me if I tell you my pick is Bayonetta? And that is not all – have you ever played a game that is in a language you cannot understand? If you have, have you ever wondered how the players who actually can understand the language would make sense of it? If you haven't, can you imagine someone do not understand English would play and make sense of the games? Do you think I, this Chinese guy in front of you with a funny accent, will make different senses out of videogames than you?

The point here is that as much as some media would like to have us to believe, we play videogames very different and understand videogames and play very differently, with our own personalities. The purpose of this study is to explore how your opinions about videogames are different from others, and more importantly, why.

2. **What are we going to do?**

I would like invite you to play some games first. I will offer four choices, and you can choose one to play. And we will be talking about this game and other stuff related to videogames in the interview afterwards. Play a game for an hour and have a chat about videogames with me for another hour – that is all I would like you to do.

3. **How long those sessions would last?**

The length of gaming session is up to 60 minutes. The length a typical interview is 60 minutes, give or take. Normally it would not be any longer than 75 minutes.

4. **How are you going to record those activities?**

I will use camera to record on-screen gaming footage; interviews will be recording in audio form.

5. **Video recording?!**

Yes, video recording. But only for what is going on on-screen. It is not necessary for you to be in the frame.

6. **What will happen to the footage and data during and after you finish this study?**

Footages will be kept in encrypted portable hard disk drivers alongside other anonymised data. Meaning even I somehow lost the HHDs, whoever found it would still not be able to access the data and footage. The video recordings will be erased permanently after I complete this study. Anonymised transcriptions will be preserved indefinitely – but worry not, those will remain encrypted and anonymised.

7. **What are the risks in participating in this study?**

Not that any I can think up of. We play videogames and talk about it. That is literally it.

8. **What are the benefits in participating in this study?**

Again, nothing in particular – besides the crisps and drinks.

9. **Can I quit halfway through? / What if I do not particularly feel like to do one or more things in the study?**

You can quit at any point during the process, without giving any reason and not worrying about any consequences.

Also, you can refuse to do any particular thing if you did not want to, even just a single question I asked. In other words, you do not need to quit the study to avoid taking part of certain events that you do not like.

If you want to withdraw from the study entirely, namely retrieve your consent and not being referenced directly or quoted in any future official documentation (i.e. submission to the final viva, publication), you need to send me your decision in written form. It will be added to your consent form and all data generated by you will be erased permanently. However you will not be able to withdraw from this study after this study is completed, as all data are anonymised and video footages destroyed, I will not be able to identify which pieces of data are generated by you.

10. **Whom should I contact if I had any further questions about it?**

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me, Yinyi Luo. I am a PhD candidate with School of Media and Communications, which is formally known as Institute of Communication Studies. You can email me, csylu@leeds.ac.uk, or talk to me in person.

If you had problems that you do not feel comfortable to talk about with me, your can contact my supervisors, Dr Helen Thornham in School of Media and Communication

(h.thornham@leeds.ac.uk) or Associate Professor Dr Nick Robinson in School of Politics and International Studies (n.robinson@leeds.ac.uk).

Appendix 5: Participant Debriefing Script

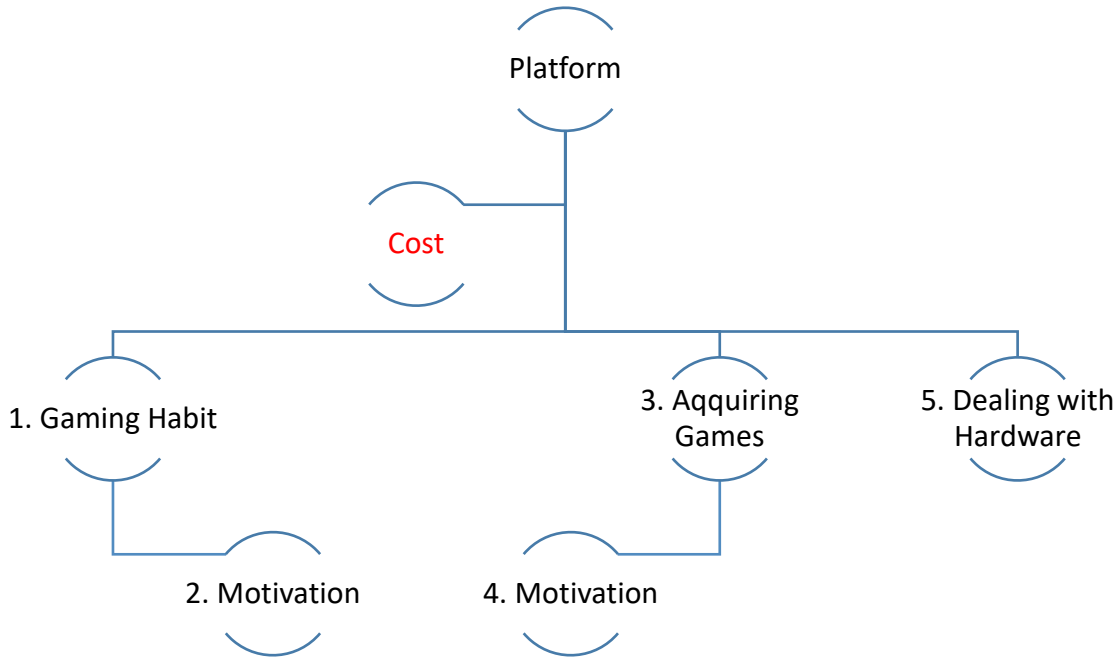
Before each fieldwork session starts (interview, gaming session, focus group), there will be an oral debriefing. What follows is a list of key points will be covered during the debriefing. Participants will receive a similar (however possibly more condensed) debriefing after each field work session.

1. Participants will be welcomed to the study and given hard copies of the information sheet (and consent form to sign if it is a participant's first session). They will be asked to read (and sign and fill in the consent form in a participant's first meeting). And I will explain that the information pertaining to these forms will be kept separately from the recordings and transcripts.
2. Participants will be thanked for their participation and asked if they have any initial questions or comments about the project or their own involvement (having read the information sheet).
3. The premises of the study will be explained in simple language and not academic jargon, primarily purpose of this study, overall research design. Key points such as the anonymity, steps for withdrawal and implications for participation will be emphasised.
4. Participants will be reminded that their personal details will be stored in a confidential manner in accordance with the University's guidelines on this matter, and that all quotations are published anonymously.
5. Participants will be informed of the Code of Practice on Whistleblowing. The participants will be told that if I deemed the experiences or activities disclosed during participations were severe enough, it is possible that I broke the promise of confidentiality to a minimum degree – in this particular case I would report such cases to their personal tutors.
6. Participants will again be shown the contact details on the Information Sheet, in case of a complaint or concerns about the research.
7. Participants will be asked to confirm their consents for participation verbally.
8. Participants who express a more general interest in this area of research will be offered recommendations for further reading.

Appendix 6: Interview and Gaming Session Schedules

After debriefing (see in Debriefing Script) and emphasising the purpose of focus group discussion is to hear what they have to say about the topics,

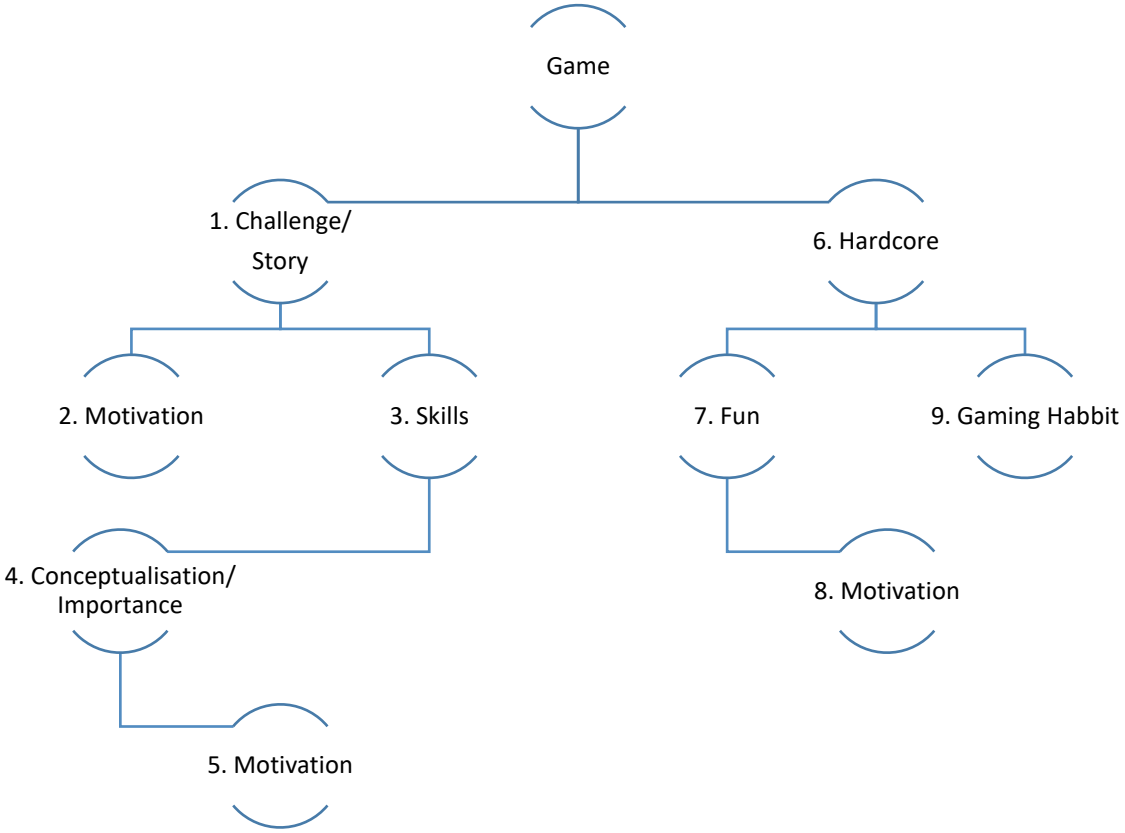
Open with: I'd like to start with a self-introduction, create a pseudonym for yourself, preferably name of a character (either you like or you played as) in a videogame; then tell us what you are playing at the moment and what is good and bad about it.



Follow-up props:

1. When and where do you play? (And then in the gaps – which indicate things about perceptions of gaming – follow up with 'don't you play games on social media? Or mobile etc…)
2. Do you agree with the term 'pc master race'? How do you think we should be picking up platforms?
3. So how you get games? Do you find it easy to play the games you want to? What issues are there?
4. How you decide what games to get?
5. Have some interesting story about hardware that you want to share?
6. Also – because this is a key research thing – do you need to be skilled to game? Do you need to be skilled to enjoy gaming? What is skill?

Expected Answer 2: Game



1. (Sum up discussion, leading to this set of concepts), challenges and story in a video-game, which is more important? Why?
2. But what is more important when it comes to choosing games to play? Will you play for story?
3. Talking about challenges, one thing that we need to tackle with them is skill, or so I was told. Do you think so? Or to put it more bluntly, what is skill anyway?
4. Do you think they are important, skills, when it comes to gaming?
5. So will you be actively thinking about this concept while deciding what game to play or how to play?
6. (Briefly sum up the games) Interesting, (a lot of) hardcore games. What do you think of this concept, hardcore game or hardcore gamer, does it make sense to you?
7. (Briefly sum up previous discussion, and if nobody mentioned the term fun)If hard-core games are meant to be more challenging and demanding by nature, so what is fun in playing it?
8. Are those the reasons why we play videogames? Any other ones?
9. How's your 'policy' on walkthroughs/FAQs?

List of Questions

	Category	Topic
1.1	Experiences of Play	How long have you being playing video-games?
1.2	Experiences of Play	What is the first game played? How you started?
1.3	Experiences of Play	What platform/consoles have you owned?
1.4	Experiences of Play	Favourite game of all time? Why?
2.1	Pattern of Gaming	Frequency and length of gaming
2.2	Pattern of Gaming	Typical context for gaming (platform, with whom)
2.3	Pattern of Gaming	Typical content for gaming and why
2.4	Pattern of Gaming	Motives for everyday play activities
3.1	Playing with Video-games	How you get your equipment for gaming?
3.2	Playing with Video-games	How you get your games?
3.3	Playing with Video-games	What else you do with videogames (talk about it with friends, read videogame news, attend conventions, discuss videogames online, modding)?
3.4	Playing with Video-games	What are interesting the aforementioned things?
4.1	Gaming Skills/Motiva-tion	What do you value the most in a videogame - challenge/story/aesthetics? What makes you play a game?
4.2	Gaming Skills/Motiva-tion	What is the most challenging game you have finished/played?

4.3	Gaming Skills/Motivation	How challenging you like a game to be?
4.4	Gaming Skills/Motivation	On what difficulty you typically play?
4.5	Gaming Skills/Motivation	Do you do trophy/achievement hunt? Why (not)?
4.6	Gaming Skills/Motivation	What does gaming skills means to you?
4.7	Gaming Skills/Motivation	Why you play videogames?

Gaming session Schedule

Schedule:

	Category	Topic
1.1	Choice/Motivation	Why choose this game but not the rest?
1.2	Choice/Motivation	Is this the kind of games you will pick-up yourself?
1.3	Choice/Motivation	Will you consider play the rest and why?
1.4	Choice/Motivation	P/Does the game delivers?
1.5	Choice/Motivation	Will you consider play the rest in your own time?
1.6	Choice/Motivation	Why or why not?
2.1	Skills	What is/not challenging?
2.2	Skills	How does it compare to the games you are playing?
2.3	Skills	Whether like the challenges in the game? Why?

2.4	Skills	Will you seek challenges in videogames?
3.1	Gaming/Play	What do you like and not like of the game played?
3.2	Gaming/Play	Will you seek out and play this game again?
3.3	Gaming/Play	Why or why not?
4.1	Play with Videogames	How you decide what game to play/buy?
4.2	Play with Videogames	How you seek information for videogames?
4.3	Play with Videogames	What you do when encounter difficulties in games?
4.4	Play with Videogames	With activity log – reflection?

Appendix 7: Games Used in Gaming-Sessions

DARK SOULS 2

Key features according to the publisher, Bandai Namco[41]:

- Go Beyond Death: dare yourself to engage against intense gameplay in a vast world powered by an all new engine that leaps graphics, sound & FX forward like never before
- A labyrinth of monsters & bosses: immerse yourself into mind-bending environments filled with new twisted monsters and deadly bosses that could only come from the imagination of FROM SOFTWARE
- Sensory assault: a wide range of threats will prey on human senses & phobias - auditory hallucinations, vertigo, acrophobia, etc.
- Deeper and darker: more intricate customization options provide weapons and armor tailoring to player style
- Evolved multiplayer: updated multiplayer system enables improved online interaction to bring forward cooperative & competitive play
- Refined gameplay: DARK SOULS™ II features fluid motion-capture animations, an upgraded combat system, a vastly expanded suite of characters, deeper customization options, new weapons, armor abilities, and a balanced player progression system

The action role-playing game is known for its punishing difficulty and atmospheric world-building with imaginative art-design. Aside from obvious aesthetic preferences, with those features, one could argue this game is designed to appeal to players who are more interested in engaging and challenging single player experiences. The expensive game-world also indicates it aims particularly to appeal to players who are willing to dedicate their time and effort to learn and pondering about the game. Indeed, as a videogame critic Tom Bramwell summarises in his review of the game[42]:

> Either way, make sure you play it, because Dark Souls 2 is in a class far beyond most other RPGs. Its gloomy crypts, haunted forests and burning fortresses are plumbed into the foundations of the world with the same carefully appointed detail as anything else in the Souls canon, sparingly direct about their history and intentions so

[41] http://store.steampowered.com/app/236430/DARK_SOULS_II/, Last accessed 04/03/18
[42] http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2014-03-11-dark-souls-2-review Last accessed 04/03/18

> that you piece what story you can together from scraps. It's full of startling and confounding moments, enigmatic systems and items that will only make sense over multiple playthroughs, and it is certainly a game you can hope to play and talk about for a long time to come.

LEGEND OF ZELDA: WINDWAKER HD

A brief description of the game provided by the publisher[43]:

> On a small island in the Great Sea, a young boy awakens on his birthday with no idea of the adventure that awaits him. When Link's sister is kidnapped and taken to the Forsaken Fortress, he sets off in pursuit – accompanied by pirate Tetra and her crew. As he's about to rescue his beloved Aryll, Link is cast into the sea where he encounters the King of Red Lions, a wise boat who speaks of the legendary pearls of the goddesses. Together they sail the Great Sea on a crucial quest to save the world from darkness.
>
> Grasp the Wind Waker, a magical baton with the power to control the wind, and embark on an unforgettable adventure. Tackle dungeons filled with devious puzzles and vicious monsters, and collect powerful items to aid Link in his quest to overthrow Ganondorf.

As a part of the Legend of Zelda franchise, this action-adventure game is known for its cartoon-style presentation, creatively story-telling through cliché story tropes, and relatively low difficulty. As game critic Jose Otero puts it[44]:

> Back in the day, Wind Waker's cartoony style came under fire for being "too kiddie." But the joke's on its critics, because while its contemporaries haven't stood the test of time well, Wind Waker has refused to grow old. This timeless tale of a young boy searching for his kidnapped sister re-works classic lore from The Legend of Zelda into a thoughtful and heartwarming adventure that loops itself around familiar tropes.
>
> […]

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[43] https://www.nintendo.co.uk/Games/Wii-U/The-Legend-of-Zelda-The-Wind-Waker-HD-765386.html, last accessed 04/03/18

[44] http://uk.ign.com/articles/2013/09/17/the-legend-of-zelda-the-wind-waker-hd-review, last accessed 04/03/18

> The enemies of Wind Waker might be considered easy when compared to beefier creatures found in other action adventures and RPGs, but few games present foes that blend animation and personality so well. That makes them a joy to fight.

Taken together, it could be argued that the game is designed to appeal to players who are interested in distinctively relaxing aesthetic presentation and a relatively less intense gaming experiences – as most 'Nintendo games' arguably are.

BAYONETTA 2

This is how the publisher, Nintendo, describes this game[45]:

> In this climactic sequel to the critically acclaimed Bayonetta action game, players will be on the edge of their seats from start to finish. Brimming with jaw-dropping battles and gorgeous cut scenes, this game never lets up on the action. […]
>
> The witch is back
>
> Born of a forbidden union between the Lumen Sages and the Umbra Witches, the mighty witch Bayonetta travels from the distant past to the present day. With her graceful fighting style and peerless magical powers, she captivates and terrifies her opponents in their final moments.
>
> Armed with deadly weapons and abilities, Bayonetta has her enemies baffled by her moves and torture attacks. Using magic, she can unleash an ability called Umbran Climax to summon demonic monsters and deliver mighty attacks repeatedly.

This is a rare case of Nintendo published game with a more adult-player-oriented theme and presentation. Develop by Platinum Games, this hack-and-slash action game is known for its gratuitously sexualised presentation (and many sexual innuendoes) of its characters and its extraordinarily well-designed gameplay. As game critic Arthur Gies puts it[46]:

> When Platinum Games is on, it's really, really on, and Bayonetta 2 is in almost any respect that counts a better game than the first, whose mechanics were already exemplary. But every time I'd feel on a roll, enjoying my time with Bayonetta 2 immensely, I'd be broken out of it by another cheap shot of T&A. I would be wrecking a flock of angelic or demonic enemies, sliding in and out of witch time almost at will,

[45] https://www.nintendo.co.uk/Games/Nintendo-Switch/Bayonetta-2-1313750.html#Overview, last accessed 04/03/18.
[46] https://www.polygon.com/2014/10/13/6957677/bayonetta-2-review-wii-u, last accessed 04/03/18.

> and then the special weapon I had picked up became a literal stripper pole for Bayonetta to dance on, because ... well, because, I guess.

Taken together, it is not a leap to suggest that this game is often assumed to appeal to the more 'stereotypical' players demographic, namely the male teenager/young adults, although not without a twist – the protagonist of the game is the titular character Bayonetta. As fetishised as her presentation is, she is also an oddly anti-misogynist as a character in an action game, as not only she has well-defined character that has little to do with other male characters, but she is also the protagonist.

THE LAST OF US

Here are a list of key features provided by the retailor, Amazon[47]:

> Key Features
> Become the hunter and the hunted in a brutal post-pandemic world. Play as Joel, a ruthless survivor, who is paired with Ellie, a brave young teenage girl, as they work together to endure a dangerous trek across a familiar, yet post-pandemic United States.
> Intense character-driven narrative featuring a cast of resonant characters that take you on a rich, emotional journey via Naughty Dog's award-winning cinematic storytelling, performance capture, and high-production values.
> Explore a decimated, overgrown America reclaimed by nature, marked with remnants of human civilization juxtaposed against beautiful, lush environments, delivered by realistic and stunning graphics.
> Strategize how to survive enemy encounters as the Balance of Power AI system continuously adapts to whether Joel or the enemies gain the upper hand. Quickly manoeuvre to survive encounters as enemies will change their behaviour based on what weapon they see Joel holding, how many of them are left alive, and whether the player has managed to surprise them.
> Learn how to survive day-by-day: scavenge for vital resources, craft weaponry out of environmental objects, and compete with other survivors for limited supplies and ammo.

[47] https://www.amazon.co.uk/The-Last-Of-Us-PS3/dp/B00844PC9S, last accessed 05/03/18.

It should be immediately obvious that this game is also designed for the more mature demographic of videogame players who are both experienced in gaming and will appreciate more sophisticated, serious storytelling, but do not see videogames only as 'feel-good experiences'. Drawing on the popular subject matter in the entertainment world at the time – zombies, the game developer Naughty Dog presented a videogame that is decisively adult, violent, gory, and deprssing. As game critic Paul Sartori puts it[48]:

> The Last of Us is visually arresting, mechanically solid, maturely written and by turns heart-rending, tense, unnerving and brutal. Check your ammo. Grab your shiv. Just try your best to stay alive.

[48] https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2013/jun/05/the-last-of-us-ps3-video-game-review, last accessed 05/03/18.