

A New Approach to Subculture: Gaming as a Substantial Subculture of Consumption

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Abstract

The article works within and against both modernist and postmodernist conceptualizations of subcultures in order adequately to theorize the contemporary videogaming subculture in South Africa, researched using qualitative methodologies in 2011-2012. Distancing itself from the early left-modernist 'subculture as proletarian resistance' model by drawing on postmodern accounts that stress fluidity, diversity, and a subcultural location within consumer culture, this study nevertheless resists their claimed ephemerality and superficiality of subcultural commitment. Hodkinson's 2002 subculture study as a compromise between the two schools stressing subcultural *substance* was profitably used to study contemporary videogaming.

Keywords: videogaming, subcultural theories, consumer culture, cultural economy, subculture of consumption, Paul Hodkinson.

Introduction

Anyone embarking upon research into a contemporary subculture is faced with two opposing schools: the 'modernist' approach to subcultures seminally defined by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), the founding department of the discipline of cultural studies at the University of Birmingham (Hall & Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979), and the more recent 'postmodernist' school (Thornton 1995; Bennett 1999; Muggleton 2000; Muggleton & Weinzierl 2003). The latter offered a sustained critique of the

very foundations of the CCCS approach to the analysis of subcultures, and has much of value to say, but my own journey through these rival claims was intimately bound up with the data I was obtaining from my own qualitative ethnographic research, so that a dialectical process emerged where theoretical concepts and ethnographic data entered into dialogue with each other, and the results of that I will discuss below. The focus of my research was to identify how serious gamers (those who play videogames) manifested themselves as an authentic contemporary subculture in South Africa, with most of the research taking place in Durban and extending to Johannesburg over a two year period (2011-2012). The study was not interested in games as texts, that is, their semiotic or other textual analysis to reveal their meanings and themes; instead I was interested in the community of lived experiences that developed around the acts of gaming, a subculture with its own interests, dynamics and boundaries that differentiated itself from others. In this article I will draw attention to (a) the theoretical model for subcultures I eventually settled on, explaining how my ethnographic and other evidence influenced my conceptualizations, and (b) provide ethnographic evidence of how that theory and its set of concepts illuminated the gaming subculture.

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

Instead of supposing that goods are primarily needed for subsistence plus competitive display, let us assume that *they are needed for making visible and stable the categories of culture*. It is standard ethnographic practice to assume that all material possessions carry social meanings and to concentrate a main part of cultural analysis upon their use as communicators (1979: 38: my emphases).

Material goods made by capitalist corporations for the motive of profit are dignified by their vocation to communicate culture. Lash and Urry (1994: 64) identify the ‘blurred’ contemporary division between the economy and

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

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

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

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

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

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

If therefore ordinary people are no longer considered, as McRobbie showed, to be the unwitting products of determining structures, but are instead understood as ‘active consumers’ or ‘active audiences’ reflexively acting upon reality and themselves, then the meaning of ‘consumption’ shifts from its almost entirely derogatory meaning, with its suggestions of mindless manipulation, to a much more nuanced appreciation of the complex role that consumption plays in everyday *culture* as a way not only of materializing culture, but also of fabricating subjectivities. The rigid division between the economic and the cultural is simply no longer tenable.

It is in this light that we can speak of a ‘subculture of consumption’ which Schouten and McAlexander (1995: 43) define as ‘a distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity’. They continue that ‘people identify with certain objects or consumption activities and, through those objects or activities, identify with other people’ (1995: 48). Their focus is the Harley Davidson motorcycle, and the subcultural sociality that is voluntarily formed around it and its deeply-held cultural meanings, such as that of outlaw freedom. The focus of this article is the video gaming subculture in South Africa, a ‘distinctive subgroup’ with a ‘shared commitment’ to gaming, and a contemporary one where the ‘economic’ and the ‘cultural’ constantly ‘blur’ into each other.

Videogames are often posited as a trivial media form not worthy of in-depth analysis and study (Newman 2004: 13). To the non-gaming individual, videogames may appear ‘impenetrably complex and monotonous’, and even incomprehensible (Newman 2004: 13), and stereotypically belonging to a world of estranged lonely youths with a predilection for violence! And yet, the sheer size of the gaming industry, and its penetration into the everyday life of millions upon millions of people around the globe, surely invites topical academic attention. A recent statistical survey conducted by the ESA (Entertainment Software Association

2011) revealed that in 2011 72% of American households play videogames, and that the videogaming industry in the USA generated sales of 16.6 billion dollars. Every sizeable shopping mall in South Africa has a gaming outlet. While it may have begun as a niche interest, videogaming is now part of the mainstream leisure experience, a process no doubt accelerated by the emergence of the gaming console (Playstation 3; XBOX 360; and Ninetendo Wii). There are only a few scholarly texts on videogames, and no comprehensive critical history of video games and the gaming subculture (Murphy 2004: 228). This is in contrast to the strong academic focus on the history and analysis of computer-mediated communications. However, the lack of critical scholarship of video games and the gaming subculture is hard to understand when the field is so huge, due to the size of the videogames industry and its mass appeal in modern society (Murphy 2004: 228-229).

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

Subculture Theory

I will critically examine the CCCS approach by confining myself to Hebdige's seminal *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). His argument largely rested on an examination of the original punk movement in the late 1970s. He argued that a youth subculture can be seen as a type of 'noise', a semiotic and cultural resistance disrupting the social normality of the hegemonic order. It can become 'an actual mechanism of semantic disorder' creating a 'blockage in the system of representation' (1979: 355). This is achieved through 'spectacular style' (a way of dressing and appearance). Style is indicative of the differentiation of a subcultural grouping from

mainstream society; punks, for example appropriated everyday commodities and re-signified them in aberrant, counter-hegemonic ways. He argued further that these ‘distinctive rituals of consumption, through style’ allow the subculture to reveal ‘its ‘secret’ identity and communicate its forbidden meanings’. Subcultures are defined by group identity, with strong boundary maintenance, stylistic homogeneity within the membership of a subculture, and with a high degree of commitment from members (Muggleton 2000: 52), their very spectacular style ensuring a clear line between themselves and outsiders. There was a strong dose of CCCS Marxist theory at work in Hebdige’s analysis: subcultures were made up of working-class youth, and authenticated themselves through their symbolic acts of resistance to the dominant capitalist system.

For Hebdige, subcultures are eventually ‘incorporated’ into the dominant cultural paradigm through two ways (1979: 356). Firstly, this is achieved through the conversion of sub-cultural signs into mass-produced objects (commodities): punk fashion is sold on the High Street. Secondly, there is a re-labelling and re-definition of deviant behaviour by the mainstream media in order to ideologically incorporate the subculture into dominant meanings. Now absorbed by the consumer culture of capitalism to which they were unremittingly hostile, subcultures like punks become a parody of themselves, their erstwhile signs of rebellion now empty fashionable and profitable gestures.

Sarah Thornton (1995: 104) pioneered the usage of the concept ‘subcultural capital’, which can be defined as the pertinent cultural knowledge necessary for members to acquire in order to obtain legitimacy within a subculture. She defines subcultural capital as ‘a currency which correlates with and legitimizes unequal statuses’ (1996: 104). She drew attention to the internal hierarchies present in contemporary subcultures, in her case club culture, determined by the possession of subcultural capital. In other words, far from being revolutionary enclaves à la CCCS, subcultures actually contained their own hierarchies and inequalities of power, most notably around being an ‘insider’ or on the fringes, and around being in possession of arcane subcultural knowledge of which outsiders are ignorant. Those in possession of large amounts of subcultural capital in effect policed the boundaries of the subculture, deciding who was ‘in’ and who was ‘out’.

Furthermore, Thornton pointed out, far from being determinedly (working-) class conscious, the clubbers she researched saw themselves as

‘classless’, temporarily free as youths from the pernicious British class structure.

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

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

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

A further postmodern criticism of the CCCS approach stems from the fact that the approach cannot effectively deal with the gap between scientific constructs (theoretical models) applied by academics and the ‘common sense reality of social actors’, whose crucial subjective views and meanings can only be accessed through qualitative ethnographic research (Muggleton 2000: 11). Instead, a Marxist/Semiotic model is imposed upon the subculture: typically the approach identifies a historical problem faced by the working

class, and semiotically ‘decodes the political and ideological meanings of the subcultural response’ (Muggleton 2000: 12). Hebdige’s modernist reliance on High Theory portrays the punk subculture in the light of political struggle when arguably that resistance may have not been apparent to the punks themselves. Punks, perhaps, saw their subcultural groups more as ‘casual friendship networks’ than resistance movements that were created to oppose the dominant cultural paradigm, and societal authority (Crawford & Rutter 2006: 153). Hebdige’s commitment to working class struggle is glaringly revealed when he excludes middle-class ‘Hippies’ from the definition of subculture (1979: 148).

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

In a similar light, membership of contemporary subcultures was seen to be ‘fluid’ (Weinzierl & Muggleton 2003), and thus it was argued the CCCS approach is ineffective in assessing the fluidity of the membership and structure in contemporary subcultures. Bennett (1999) was one of the first academics to write about this fallacy and address it with his concept of ‘Neo-Tribes’. Bennett adapted Maffesoli’s concept of *tribus* (tribes) and applied it to youth involved in the dance scene in Britain, and argued that these groupings which had previously been understood as ‘coherent subcultures’ were something else entirely. Rather he argues they are to be understood as a ‘series of temporal gatherings characterised by fluid boundaries and floating

memberships' (Bennett 1999: 600). Postmodern subcultures thus have these qualities: membership is defined by sense of fragmented identity; members have transient attachment to the subculture with a lower degree of commitment; and have multiple stylistic identities. As such, there is stylistic heterogeneity within these subcultures, with weak boundary maintenance for the membership, a higher rate of mobility for members, who are concerned with the 'surface' of style and image (Muggleton 2000: 52).

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

In my field-work while observing and interviewing gamers, I found most of the postmodern critique of the CCCS model convincing, and I rejected the following CCCS concepts: the Marxist theory of youth working-class resistance to capitalism (there was no evidence in my research of anti-capitalist militancy, or any social class identification as gamers, while the average age of a gamer in the USA is 37 years old (ESA 2013): this is not exclusively a youth subculture); the notion that subcultures necessarily focused on 'spectacular style' (this obviously was not what gaming was about); that authentic subcultures are outside of commerce and the media (gamers belong precisely to a 'subculture of consumption' focused on the media products called games); and the notion that subcultures were rigidly structured and homogenous (my research revealed a wide subcultural heterogeneity. The gaming subculture has a varied membership, and because of the nature of the gaming industry, which produces a multiplicity of titles, within different genres, there are many different groupings of people around these many titles and genres).

In recent decades, consumer culture has expanded dramatically, its growth greatly assisted by globalization (Muggleton 2000: 30). Therefore, it is inevitable that a subculture may arise from the trenches of modern consumerism, where both media and commerce intersect (Muggleton 2000: 57). Videogames are a prime example of this trend. Gaming can be viewed as an authentic contemporary subculture, born out of the act of consumption of a

mere product, which is the videogame. One could helpfully describe gaming as a ‘subculture of consumption’ (Schouten & McAlexander 1995; Arnould & Thompson 2005; Thompson & Troester 2002), as I earlier did. Thus, through the pursuit of common consumption interests participants in a subculture of consumption create distinctive, yet at the same time fragmented, subcultures of consumption (Arnould & Thompson 2005: 873). The networks of ‘meanings and practices’ that characterise a subculture of consumption are not fixed in a ‘particular set of socioeconomic circumstances’ which is reflected in the membership (Thompson & Troester 2002: 553).

New Model of Subcultural Analysis

However, my ethnographic research also threw up a problem with the postmodern approach to subcultures, and this was to do with what I take to be an excessive reaction to the highly structured notion of subculture one found with Hebdige/CCCS: the new affirmation was not only a stress on ‘fluidity’, but also on *superficiality* and *ephemerality*, with subculturalists flitting from one slightly interesting subculture to another like television channel hopping, and never seriously committing to any. It was all ‘depthless’ postmodernism. In my interviews with gamers, I discovered quite the opposite, that the subcultural commitment to gaming was treated very seriously by the members of the gaming subculture.

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

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

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

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

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

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

His central theme of ‘cultural substance’ is broken down into four indicative criteria of identity, commitment, consistent distinctiveness and

autonomy (Hodkinson 2002: 29-30).

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

Hodkinson (2002: 30-31) notes the lack of focus on individual members of a subculture, in terms of their own subjective accounts, throughout the history of subcultural study. In other words, he takes issue with a lack of focus on 'Identity' in subcultural study. The indicator of identity is for Hodkinson where the researcher focuses on the subjective perceptions of the subculturalists themselves that they are 'involved in a distinct cultural grouping and share feelings of identity with one another'. This will lead, for Hodkinson, to the identification of a clear awareness of a sustained sense of group identity. Centrally what this does is help to define structural understanding from the perspectives of gamers themselves, who are internally involved in the 'subculture' of gaming.

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

Hodkinson (2002: 32-33) regards both commerce and the media as crucially important to 'the construction and facilitation of subcultures': a sign of a substantial subculture is that subculturalists are themselves involved in commerce (running a shop selling subcultural goods, for example) and media (promoting or articulating the subculture, or a website community forum). Within this criterion, known as 'Autonomy', the importance of different

scales and types of media and commerce is essential. Inevitably, a subculture will be connected to the society and politico-economic system that it is situated in, but retaining a high level of subcultural autonomy. This criterion acknowledges the fine line between profit-making in subcultural businesses which are voluntary and grass-roots in origin, and commercial profiteering. Hodkinson's interest lies in theoretically distinguishing between internal (subcultural) and external (non-subcultural products and services) forms of media and commerce.

For the purposes of researching the gaming subculture as a contemporary subculture, per Hodkinson's (2002) model, a qualitative research methodology was implemented. Essentially, qualitative research gives the researcher the opportunity to describe the 'lifeworlds' of subcultural gamers, and represent their subjective point of view within the research (Flick, Kardorff and Steinke 2004: 3). The research framework of participant observation was employed to allow the researcher to become immersed in the gaming subculture, and participate in the social activities of gamers like multiplayer competitions, gaming-centric exhibitions and social gatherings, and doing so for an extended period of time (Whyte 2001: 162-163). This allowed for the opportunity to conduct semi-structured interviews, which consisted of a list of pre-determined questions to ask, but the method of asking remained as casual as possible (Berger 2000: 112). Research subjects - gamers - were sampled purposively which meant subjects could be picked due to prior research experience fitting within pre-determined criteria, mainly being that gamers are either 'hardcore' or 'casually' committed players of videogames (Bertrand & Hughes 2005: 68). Thematic analysis was chosen as the means of analysis as it allowed for an easier method of 'data reduction' and made it easier, as important themes (or concepts) could emerge from within the 'data set' (Ayres 2008: 867).

13 gamers were interviewed. Both 'hard core' and 'casual' gamers were interviewed; six independent game developers were interviewed; nine gamers were men, and 4 were women. Participant observation was mostly carried out at venues where gamers congregate: in Durban I attended many monthly DBNGamers events, and in Johannesburg I attended twice the annual and very large rAge Expo, the mecca for South African gamers. I am a serious gamer myself, and therefore a participant in the subculture I was researching. For example, I play as a member of 'squad' in the game Battlefield 3 online, and I am currently working as part of the gaming

industry as a journalist for a local South African website called ‘eGamer’, which focuses on all things gaming.

Analysis

Data resulting from the usage of Hodkinson’s model proved to be both interesting and often unexpected. A perspective of the inner-workings of the gaming subculture’s structure were gained, and where I assumed the subculture to be structurally fluid, it was surprising to find a more definite and hierarchical structure. This was interesting because despite the claims of fluidity by postsubcultural theorists such as Muggleton (2000), the gaming subculture proved to have a ‘structure’ propelled by a sustained shared sense of group identity (Hodkinson 2002: 31). This structure was informed by a connection of gamers to other gamers, achieved through a ‘set of shared tastes and values’ (Hodkinson 2002: 30). This was found to be quite consistent among hardcore gamers, be it if they were hardcore female or male gamers, and this covered the area of Hodkinson’s first and second criteria of ‘consistent distinctiveness’ and ‘identity’, which I have run together.

For example, one of the hardcore gamers interviewed, named Caveshen, had much to say in regards to the shared values that gamers have, and it was from this one can discern a structure emerging in gaming as a contemporary subculture. As a result, these shared values inform a sustained ‘shared sense’ of group identity among peers within the gaming subculture, who felt the same way about videogames. It was revealed that largely hardcore gamers felt this way.

Gaming itself is somewhat ‘interior’ in displaying its values, as an external display of one being a gamer is not a universal practice among gamers. This is part of the larger question of what exactly the signs of being a gamer are, if external displays of commitment are not universal among the core of the gaming subculture. Caveshen (2012) had this to say:

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

This element factors into the ‘level of knowledge’ that a gamer has, their

subcultural capital. Caveshen (2012) defines this knowledge by saying, 'It's this inbred knowledge that you can only have if you've played games. And then if you don't have it, it's easily identifiable'. Displaying this 'knowledge' to other games can be seen as a qualifying statement that you are a 'gamer', because you demonstrate your knowledge in conversation, or other such situations. This is easily one of the most important shared values among gamers, and is a consistent factor in considering who is and is not a gamer, at the subcultural core of gaming. Being considered a gamer, according to Caveshen, is about having the knowledge in order to be what gamers term a 'hardcore gamer', and many revere as the 'true' ideal of what a gamer is and should be. As such, Caveshen (2012) further says that these types of gamers have a varied language discourse that differs from what they would consider 'casual gamers', or in the subcultural sense 'periphery members' of the overall gaming community. Caveshen (2012) argues that:

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

This agreed to by a female hardcore gamer who was interviewed, named Nadine. She agreed that 'game speak' (knowledge about games) is an important determining factor of whether a person can be validated as a 'gamer' by other games, as she says:

Well if you talk to someone and you go to the topic of gaming, or entertainment, or hobbies, or whatever and they say they play games. It easy to know if they're a casual gamer if they give you the 'Oh yeah, Modern Warfare!'. You know that's all they play, or Need For Speed or something. That's all they play (Nadine 2012).

Nadine (2012) recognises that distinguishing a person as a gamer is through the 'things they mention', and gamers themselves are more knowledgeable than those on the periphery, who are normally considered casual gamers. For Nadine, a true gamer is someone who knows what's happening in the current gaming 'scene', and this is an expression of their explicit interest in gaming.

Typically, casual gamers would not have this in-depth knowledge.

Regarding Hodkinson's next criterion of 'commitment', the gaming researcher quickly learns that for hardcore gamers their dedication to gaming is a serious life commitment. Commitment is a shared value for many hardcore gamers because it largely defines who they are. The sheer number of hours per day that hardcore gamers spend on gaming emphasised their deep commitment. Gaming – new game titles, for example - was also the main topic of conversation. Caveshen (2012), who is intensely committed to videogaming, had to say this regarding a gamer's dedication:

I think it's the willingness to want to play games everyday, and if they don't play games they feel incomplete with their day. It's just their dedication towards gaming. They will for instance want to talk about gaming all the time, and if they go out and have money their first thought is to spend it on games (Caveshen 2012).

When asked about other indicators of a gamer, such as clothing, Caveshen (2012) said:

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

Of course, if someone is wearing a gaming related t-shirt that may be a visual indicator of the person's status as a gamer, but it is not a shared value that all gamers wear gaming t-shirts in order to express their distinction as a gamer. Gaming does not follow the trends of more traditionally viewed subcultures such as punks, where the visual appearance of participants is a key part of the subcultural experience.

The final criterion of 'autonomy' refers to the presence of subcultural media and commerce. Looming everywhere in gaming research is the

presence of videogame studios who make all the games that are played. There was a difference between the subcultural (internal), albeit grass roots, approach of some independent videogame studios, and the more commercial studios backed by huge global publishers (external) that are solely profit-driven. Throughout the research process, independent videogame developers and studios (or indie studios) were interviewed to provide the ‘subcultural’ and an ‘internal’ perspective about the videogame industry. One of the most notable South African studios interviewed called *QCF Design* (2011), renowned for their game called *Desktop Dungeons*, had much to say. In connection to the question of whether they were driven by profit in developing games, they said:

It doesn't make sense to say we're an indie studio; we're going to make something for profit. Yeah, we're trying to survive and obviously we like to and do want to continue and succeed in making things, because we're making things that we believe in. But we're not trying to go at like no point 'okay' that we are designing by committee. There are no publisher meetings (QCF Design 2011: 2).

This demonstrates a lack of interest in profits. For *QCF Design*, being creatively passionate in the development of their videogames is paramount. For them, videogame development starts ‘out as personal projects’ and develops into a business venture only much later down the line (QCF Design 2011: 2). *QCF Design* (2011: 7) emphatically state, ‘Look we're definitely gamers. You can be a games developer without being a gamer, but you're missing out if you're not playing games’. They demonstrate a link to being ‘gamers’ that develop games as a means of expressing their passion, and this makes them connected subculturally to the gaming subculture. Their own imperative is not commercial by nature, but rather one of personal dedication to gaming.

South Africa's subcultural gaming media is mostly made up of independent gaming websites such as eGamer (egamer.co.za), MyGaming (mygaming.co.za), EL33TONLINE (el33tonline.com), Lazygamer.net (lazygamer.net), ZOMBIEGAMER (zombiegamer.co.za) and ITF Gaming (itfgaming.com), where gaming developments are discussed, and new games reviewed. Opportunities for discussion ensure that these websites also play a

role in maintaining a gamer subculture by supporting virtual communities of gamers. Gamer magazines produced in South Africa are limited to *NAG* and *PC Format*. However, *PC Format* is centered explicitly on PC hardware and the PC modding scene rather than actual gaming, which is a minor focus. Therefore *NAG* is really the only paid-for gaming magazine published in South Africa, and relies upon advertising and subscription costs. The independent gaming websites and *NAG* are equally subcultural in their approach in both subcultural employment and being motivated by a love for gaming. For example, *NAG* hosts the rAge Expo in Johannesburg every year and brings the overall South African gaming community together, whilst independent gaming websites have their own communities and followers, and these websites directly discuss gaming-related issues and communicate with gamers on a regular basis. And so we can conclude that there is a rather rich presence of both subcultural media and commerce in the South African gaming subculture.

What Hodkinson (2002) does not account for is the overlapping of his own criteria in terms of thematic structure, as they are linked to one another. One of the implications of this overlap is that Hodkinson (2002) does not factor into his own criteria the position of women, and this came across strongly in the research conducted. One must understand that although female gamers frequent the gaming subculture, it is still male dominated. One of the research participants Lisa, a female gamer who works as a professional gaming journalist, had much to say about the reception of female gaming journalists within the industry. She said:

Definitely, like I mean especially in this industry there's not that many game journalists that are girls. When you go to an event and you might be the only girl there. I don't know what other people feel about, but I feel a little bit left out like I'm the only girl here what do these guys think about me (Lisa 2012).

Lisa (2012) further elaborated upon this saying that she had a similar experience at an international gaming-related conference called *Captive*, where she was one of three female journalists, out of sixty journalists from across the world. It was in these situations that Lisa felt a sense of exclusion because of her gender, and in turn experienced a diminished sense of group identity. This was indeed an interesting research development as it showcased

a side of subcultural gender politics that both the CCCS model and Hodkinson's model do not effectively take into account.

Conclusion

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

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

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