Computer Case Modding: A Case of Subcultural Substance

Marco Gennaro Bozza

Abstract

With the popularisation of the home computer there has been a remarkable emergence of a subculture of consumption: Case Modding. Through interviews and 'nethnographic' study of modders' online activity, an argument is made that positions their active consumption of computer hardware as a subculture. I argue that postmodern subcultural theory focussing on fluidity of cultural groupings does not account for the somewhat highly committed and stable practices witnessed in the modding scene. As such Hodkinson's model of Subcultural Substance was tested and seen to be an appropriate model to account for the high levels of commitment, identity, distinctiveness and autonomy exhibited by modders.

Keywords: home computer, subculture of consumption, Case modding, Nethnographic, virtual community, postmodern subculture theory, Hodkinson, Subcultural Substance.

Introduction

Most people who have personal computers at home or in the office simply accept the hardware as it is, a nondescript box of an unmemorable colour; indeed the machinery is to a large extent invisible. However, in recent years a remarkably creative 'subculture of consumption' has emerged: 'prosumer' computer hardware modification (or 'modding', performed by 'modders'). To be a 'prosumer' is to occupy that indeterminate space between being a

'consumer and a 'producer'. It developed largely due to video gaming culture (Simon 2007), with its attendant interest in computer hardware to improve gaming performance, but soon took on a subcultural life of its own. This essay is a report on my qualitative ethnographic research into the computer-case modding subculture in South Africa. Participant observation and interviews were carried out in 2011 and 2013 on the Internet forum Carbonite Classifieds (www.carbonite.co.za) with the aim of identifying the modders' own subjective sense of their activities by using the techniques of a 'netnography' (Kozinets 2002), as the modding subculture gathers predominantly on the Internet. This study will illustrate how modifying computer cases showcases extraordinary individual creativity while feeding into the creation of a space of shared significations that congregate participants into a recognizable and substantial subculture. This cultural studies project contributes to that central branch of 'active audience' studies – research into subcultures – which confirms the rejection of those theories of mass society which posit a passive and manipulated consumer totally dominated 'from above' by the interests of capitalism. Instead our attention is drawn to those everyday acts of grassroots creativity and autonomous meaning fabrication by ordinary people 'from below', which emphasises the active role that they play in the *production of culture* (De Certeau 2002; Fiske 1989; Gelder 2007; Sassatelli 2007; Schouten & Alexander 1995; Willis 1990).

Modding can be generally defined as the active manipulation by computer users of their computer hardware which is sold on the market as stock or standard. In this study the focus of modding activities will be limited to case modding, which is the manipulation of computer cases by a user. Case modding can be described as personalised additions to computer cases where modders showcase their individual technical and aesthetic virtuosity. Such aesthetic additions could be adding Perspex windows (see **Image 1**) on the side panel on the case thus showcasing their computers internals; additions of neon lighting to light up their case; or case painting to a particular theme or style. The more technical-aesthetic 'mods' are also done such as cutting/ drilling/ welding to the case to add aesthetic elements (Perspex side) or making space to add performance enhancing parts (Water-cooling), or simply drilling holes to reroute cables and make the electronic innards 'neat'. What is deemed the most important part is that physical alterations must be made to the case, while also making it look aesthetically pleasing to the modder.

Beyond the artistic and culturally productive creativity witnessed in case modding, I noticed a strong collective ethos amongst modders. By sharing their progress, ideas and final modded designs publically on local Internet forums – Carbonite Classifieds – modders received enjoyment and subsequent recognition by subcultural peers as well and possibly non-subcultural outsiders like case manufacturers.

Image 1

Modding exists as an example of the 'power of consumption to organize consumers into social collectives' (Schouten, Martin & McAlexander 2007: 68). Most of the sparse literature that exists on computer modification by modders has focused on its relation to gaming culture (Simon 2007) or

gaming LAN[1] subculture (Raimondo 2005). This position is adequately explained by Scacchi (2010):

> PC case mods ... serve to signify a game player's interest or technological projection of self-identity onto their game play platform. Such projection denotes an unabashed choice to display one's enthusiasm, alignment, and commitment to game play as more than just entertainment, but as part of one's personal identity, fetish, cultural experience and life-style preference.

My study does not dispute this, as people who modify computers generally also play computer games, go to LANs, and might affiliate themselves strongly to a gamer identity. However, my criticism of these analyses is that they *exclusively* understand the practice of modding through gaming culture or simply as performance enhancing of computers (e.g. Simon 2007: 190; Colewell 2004). Crucially lacking from studies on modders is any qualitative research, particularly any actual ethnographically-obtained first hand subjective accounts and insights from the modders *themselves*, rather than academically interpreted 'cultural politics' at LANs (e.g. Simon 2007). It seems to me extraordinary that, when researching the 'active consumer', some academics continue to ignore those 'active' voices themselves through interviews. My own research demonstrates that there are important social processes and features to modding that are not explained by an exclusive focus on gaming identity or a LAN event; these largely unexplored areas are to do with forms of online *subcultural sociality* related to a strong affective commitment to computer hardware and aesthetics.

The Active Consumer

De Certeau (2002) argued that consumers consume commodities *actively* and *divergently* in order to create a 'secondary production' of individual pleasurable meanings often at odds with dominant meanings, and through this

---

[1] LAN gaming -refers to many computers in close proximity to one another connected to a Local Area Network(LAN) in an effort to play games together.

'bricolage' activity appropriate mass-produced commodities to their own interests (2002:66). This positions consumers as active and creative *producers of culture* 'from below'. This is because, as Fiske argues, once a commodity has been profitably sold, it leaves the 'financial economy', and takes on a second life in the *cultural economy*, where it 'becomes a resource for the culture of everyday life' (Fiske 1989: 35): the activity of production now becomes the (re-) making of (often aberrant) meanings and pleasures for commodities, reflecting the autonomous cultural interests of 'the people'. Sassatelli reinforces this notion by asserting that, 'the moment of purchase is clearly only the beginning of a complex process in which the consumer works on a commodity to *recontextualize* it, so that it may eventually end up no longer having any recognisable relation with the world of monetary exchange'(2007: 102). Fiske gives a simple example of a pair of bought jeans which are then 're-signified' by the wearer by being embroidered with personal or subcultural meanings (Fiske 1989).

This active everyday culture is richly full of what Paul Willis calls 'symbolic creativity' (1990: 206), and, according to Jagose, these recontextualized commodities are drawn into the circuits of meaning in consumers' construction of their lifestyles, and by extension their very *identities* (2003: 113): the consumer is an individual who 'speaks' through (re-written) commodities. There is a large amount of creative work that goes into modding computer cases. Modders do not passively accept their computers as is; they invest a large amount of time and energy into creatively individualising and personalising their computers to reflect their enthusiasm for computer hardware.

This consumption process potentially leads to shared consumption practices forming between active consumers. Thus a subculture of consumption (Schouten & McAlexander 1995) is essentially a grouping of active consumers of the same or similar products who share and actively construct a particular frame of reference when participating in the cultural economy of meanings; they are not only producers of culture in for example their modding practices, but also *producers of subculture*.

My own research into subcultural theory in order to make fuller conceptual sense of modders' shared consumption practices revealed a highly contested space from which I was eventually able to distil a limited range of key helpful concepts, which I briefly recount.

Marco Gennaro Bozza

Subculture Studies

The pioneering subcultural study by Hebdige (1979), drawing on the innovative work of Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) (Hall & Jefferson 2006; Willis 1978), theorized subcultures as a specifically *cultural* struggle – of 'spectacular' *style* - by working-class youths (in Britain) against the hegemonic system increasingly subject to the logic of consumerism. As in the case of punks, that consumerism became the site of a highly creative semiotic *subversion* of dominant meanings by these disaffected youth, generating an autonomous social space – a group identity - defined by clothing, magazines, music, argot, dancing, hair-styles, etc. For Hebdige (1979) this authentic grass-roots resistance to capitalism would eventually be neutralized by the media (domesticating subcultures) and business (commodifying subcultural style).

This seminal model proved largely unworkable for my purposes, having absorbed the following criticisms of it. Muggleton criticized the CCCS approach for situating youth subcultures within the Marxist 'theoretical framework of class oppression, conflict and exploitation' (2000: 16) whereby subcultures were about identifying signs of youthful working-class 'resistance' to the hegemonic 'power elite'. Not only were subcultures not confined to the working-class (think of hippies, or hipsters), but they were also not necessarily about political resistance (think of clubbing). Secondly, for Muggleton, Hebdige's Marxist/semiotic analysis entirely avoided any ethnographic phenomenological accounts of subcultural participants' subjective points of view (2000: 13), thus avoiding the complexity and variety of any subcultural membership. Thirdly, Hebdige's identification of authentic subcultures as being untouched by the media and commerce – seen as the forces of hegemony – until the latter enter to destroy the subcultures – is for Thornton and McRobbie (Thornton 1996; McRobbie 1997) simply inaccurate: for both theorists, media and commerce are there from the very beginning of any subcultural life. Thornton for example points to the role media plays in giving a positive (imaginary) coherence and identity to a subculture (a subculturalist identifies with the image a subculturalist magazine presents of that subculture), while McRobbie shows how commercial aspects do indeed 'produce a subculture in the first place' (McRobbie 1997: 198).

The fourth criticism is that subcultures are far more 'fluid', internally

diverse, 'temporary', and more sensitive to individualism, thus not determined by the highly structured, working class, and delimited groupings identified by CCCS (Bennet 1999; Bennet & Khan-Harris 2004; Muggleton 2000; Hodkinson & Deicke 2007), and are more commonly identified as 'neo-tribe' (Bennet 1999; Cova, Kozinets & Shankar 2007), 'scene' (Straw 1991), 'genre' (Hesmondhalgh 2005), and 'postmodern subculture' (Muggleton 2000).

The first three criticisms (above) have been borne out by my own research with modders: a class analysis is unhelpful; the allied concept of counter-hegemonic subcultural 'resistance' is equally misleading; and ethnographic research allows for a far richer understanding of subcultures. However, in attempting to distance their concepts from traditional subculture theory, including its rigid structuralism, postmodern theorists have overemphasised the fluidity and ephemerality of groups and individuals to the detriment of possible *relatively* stable collective groups of people in contemporary subcultures of consumption (Hodkinson 2002; Shouten & McAlexander 1995; Williams 2011). They have also ignored subcultures that do not concern themselves with popular music and dance, for example, online digital geek subculture (Hesmondhalgh 2005; McArthur 2009). Therefore my research took me to the recent work of Hodkinson, whose study of Goths is something of a theoretical compromise between earlier and postmodern positions, and whose central concepts I drew on rigorously in my own research.

Hodkinson (2002; 2004) resists the attractions of a superficial 'fluidity', and continues to identify a deeper *substance* to contemporary subcultures, while accepting their diverse membership, and their indifference to working-class resistance. He identifies four central characteristics of subcultures that in combination allows us to identify such cultural substance, all of which proved of enormous usefulness for my research: (1) consistent distinctiveness: 'a set of shared tastes and values which is distinctive from those of other groups and reasonably consistent, from one participant to the next, one place to the next and one year to the next' (2002: 30); (2) identity: the participant's own subjective evaluations of actually belonging to a collective with a sense of group identity and affiliation with others distinguishing them from outsiders (2002:31); (3) commitment: being a substantial member of a subculture is 'liable to influence extensively the everyday lives of the participants in practice, and that, more often than not,

this concentrated involvement will last years rather than months' (2002: 31); and autonomy: those '*subcultural* forms of media and commerce – which operate mostly within the networks of a particular grouping' (2002: 31) which enable the subculture to have a degree of material autonomy from mainstream society.

Methodology

The research proceeded using a qualitative approach in which the aim is to understand 'the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved' (Merriam, 2009: 9). Besides my extensive, long-term participant observation of the South African modder meeting place on Internet forum Carbonite Classifieds (www.carbonite.co.za) website between 2011 and 2013, I chose four participants for in-depth semi-structured interviews (guided by interview techniques outlined by Brenner 2006) through purposive sampling (where samples are chosen who 'will yield the most relevant and plentiful data' (Yin 2011: 88), based on their commitment to modding, and gauged by their active involvement with the website. Online pseudonyms were used as these online names are the means by which they identified themselves in the online modding community/forum. The interviews were conducted through online text-based conversations via Instant Messaging (IM) service (Gtalk) conducted in November 2011 with three participants (DAE_JAA_VOO; Kuga; and Orihalcon), and in March 2013 with a single respondent (Squigly). All four participants are spread across South Africa: DAE_JAA_VO and Squigly reside in Johannesburg, Kuga in Port Elizabeth, while Orihalcon lives in Stellenbosch, etc. A basic thematic analysis was applied to understand the consistent patterns or themes that arose out of the data (Braun & Clarke 2006). This data was coded into themes which were then tested in relation to active consumer theories and, most importantly, to Hodkinson's (2002) four indicators of subcultural substance model.

Active Consumers

A consistent theme arising from the data was that modifying one's computer is an exercise in manipulating it to reflect something custom-made and uniquely personal. As Kuga (IM Interview 2011) said: 'It's taking something

that's stock and changing it to your liking. Personalizing it to your character, to who you are as a person. It's creating something unique out [of] something standard. Usually a once in the world type of feeling'.

Image 2[2]

This viewpoint is shared by Orihalcon (2011):

> It's about taking something that you attach great joy to – as a hobby or profession – and changing it for personal enjoyment... It gives me the opportunity to create something unique. To invest time and energy into a project watching it take shape and come to completion is a great feeling.

Image 3[3] is an example of a stock standard mass produced case whereas **Image 4** is an example of participant Kuga's modification to his computer case. He painted the interior and some of the exterior white as opposed to Image 3 which consists of standard aluminium finish on the interior and an all-black exterior.

---

[2] A case mod by DAE_JAA_VOO

[3] Image 3: the Cooler master HAF 932. It sold as a 'stock standard' case http://www.coolermaster-usa.com/product.php?product_id=2810.

Image 3

Image 4

To the respondents' pleasure in consumption is their ability to create something unique in their modifications of their computer cases. There is also an understanding that the active consumption of computer hardware is about being creative, and similar to Willis' (1990) conception of the 'everyday' artist as expressed by DAE_JA_VOO (2011):

> It's art. That's really what it comes down to. I'm an artist, and case modding is a form of art (for me, at least). It's quite interesting: Once I'm FINISHED with a mod, and It's standing on my desk, I'm not actually all that 'attached' to it. I could happily sell a project I've been working on for a year a week after I've finished it, because once it's done, I get to look at it, appreciate the art, the work, the effort,

and then I'm happy. That moment right there, when it's done, that's the satisfying moment.

This comment by DAE_JA_VOO indicates that case modders' consumption of computer hardware is an act of *cultural production* whereby objects are re-contextualised for individual pleasures and meaning-making by the user (Fiske 1989; Sassatelli 2007). Thus, through case modifications, computers enter the cultural economy as resources modders use in their secondary production of meanings and pleasure.

Squigly is a modder that takes this view to the extreme in that he has discarded a conventional gaming case design (e.g. **Images 1/2/3**) in pursuing what the modding community terms a 'scratch build'[4], in this instance a computer case-as-desk (**Image 5**) whereby all his computer hardware is built around and housed within a desk he himself designed and built.

Image 5

---

[4] A scratch build is simply defined as a computer enclosure that the modder has built 'from the ground up'

As Squigly (2013) commented with regards to modding conventional cases as opposed to a highly personalised scratch build:

> You are still essentially using the framework that comes to you in the basic case. So you kind of limited as to where you can put components. There are certain aspects you can change round and things that you can change. But in a scratch build you can then convert it to absolutely anything that you want... it's to make the machine to your taste.

Subculture: Consistent Distinctiveness

As we can see, there are a variety of creative ways in which modding can be expressed by the participants, thus ensuring their distinctiveness from one another. However, the underlying premise with regards to consistent distinctiveness is the recognition that there is room for variation exhibited by modders in their modifications of computers; as Hodkinson argues, internal difference 'usually took the form of creative, yet subtle variations and additions rather than the sort of diversity that would undermine group boundaries significantly' (2004: 143). There is however a strong sense of shared values and tastes in regards to modding. To determine the level of consistent distinctiveness questions posed to the participants aimed to elucidate what they considered a mod to consist of. This gave a set of shared ideas modders have with regard to modding. The responses varied somewhat, but mostly the participants classified that a mod must be physical or other alterations to the case. As Kuga (2011) says:

> Well changing anything that makes it stock standard. Adding fans to a chassis would not be modding as the chassis supports it, however if you need to cut holes in the side panel, or whatever, and [then] adding a fan, that would be modding.

By contrast, DAE_JA_VOO (2011) defined modding as 'Any customization. Colour change, lighting additions, physical changes to the insides, etc. Modding is short for 'Modifying', so if it's been modified, it's modded'. This is also reflected in what Orihalcon (2011) responded to, as he shared the

understanding that different modder communities have different criteria for modded systems:

> I have found however that the view of what constitutes a modded system differs community to community....If you look at sites like Bit Tech, OCN, Extreme Systems[5] etc . where the hardware community and focus is immense, the level of what constitutes a mod changes accordingly.

But he still considered that a mod has 'to change the case in some way - paint it, cut it, extend it etc.' (Orihalcon 2011). Below (**Image 6**) is a case modded by Orihalcon in which he has cut circular holes into the case to provide space for extra high performance cooling fans; as well as rectangular holes for cable routing work to be done to enable better 'cable management' within the enclosure, thus making the inside of the case neater.

Image 6

DAE_JA_VOO (2011) succinctly summarised the concept of consistent distinctiveness: 'some people like having 50 million different colours in a mod, and I prefer keeping it down to one or two. That's just taste, you know? But we're all still modding at the end of the day'. Kuga reinforces the role of

---

[5] International Computer enthusiast websites with sections dedicated to modding.

aesthetics within modding (2011): 'Adding bling to something doesn't make it modding [if] it has nothing to with changing the chassis. If you need to cut holes in the chassis then I would consider that modding'.

So in essence there is an understanding that while what exactly constitutes a modified computer case can vary from person to person, there is a definitive *shared* ideal to be found, and that is basically altering the case in some way from stock standard, not merely as something aesthetic that just adds 'bling'. The act central to the subculture – modding as physical alteration to one's case - is therefore agreed upon by members.

Identity

There was indeed a subjective shared sense of identity and affiliation the respondents shared with other modders. Modders also definitely perceived a distinction between themselves and outsiders/non-modders. As Orihalcon (2011) commented in regards to modding and social life:

> Socially it affects you as well, as your PC becomes a show item of sorts and it generally sparks conversation form [*sic*] other PC users and enthusiasts. However it can just as well attract nothing from people not sharing your hobby – cue the uninformed non tech heads haha.

Importantly, there is also the practice of individuals identifying with other like-minded people by how and why they interact with each other. As Squigly (2013) said in response to posting his ideas on a scratch build:

> Most guys are really helpful. They [are] willing to jump in and give advice on things that they've tried on other machines...It was my first scratch build that I had really undertaken, so I knew a lot of the guys had done this before so I was looking for a bit of feedback.

This is authenticating other modders by invoking their shared 'technicity' (the 'interconnectedness of identity and technological competence ... [whereby] people's tastes, aptitudes and propensities towards technology become part of a particular 'identity'' (Dovey & Kennedy 2006: 64)) with

others. A point of interest is how modders distinguished between themselves in order to claim status within their modding subcultural groups, for example Squigly (2013) expressed the opinion that mods are not all 'equal' so to speak, as he commented that a scratch build 'obviously takes a lot more work so that I'd put it in a slightly different league to a standard modded case'. This comment is arguably infused with subcultural capital (Thornton 1996) meant to garner status-inducing properties within and external to the modding subculture, such as presenting himself as highly committed or skilled within the modding subculture.

With regard to group affiliation and like-mindedness, Kuga (2011) commented in relation to his perception of group affiliation and the outcome of that affiliation: 'Yeah most definately [*sic*]. I can relate to someone that shares the same passion as what I have...their choice of components would tell me if they made informed decisions or not'. In one case realisation of wider group affiliation of like-minded people made one respondent have a sense of 'formalization' of their activity, regardless that they already knew they were 'modders':

> I didn't know that there was a huge community built around this stuff, I thought I was one of FEW... I knew I was a modder before that, because I was modding. I just didn't know that that 'Modding' label even existed, and I only realised that I was a 'Modder' once I had actually discovered that label (DAE_JAA_VOO 2011).

Importantly, as opposed to literature conflating modding with gamer identity (Simon 2007; Scacchi 2010), it was pointed out by Squigly (2013) that a gaming-influenced identity and lifestyle played a part in initially creating interest around computer hardware, but it then developed into a deep interest in modding and customising his computer. As he said: 'I would say it starts in the gaming community, but I wouldn't say it's necessarily confined to it' (2013).

So in summation, there is indeed a sense of group affiliation and shared identity and sense of distinction from outsiders, built around what Orihalcon (2011) calls 'A great love for pcs and making them look good'.

Commitment

An important part of modding subcultural 'substance' is essentially how committed the participants are in their everyday lives to consumption practices around computer modification. All of the participants have modded to varying degrees for years as opposed to months. Sticking with the modding scene is important and this is partially where the individual and social rewards are felt: 'When you really put sweat and blood into creating something unique, you can appreciate the final result once it's all done...I have pretty high end hardware. I want people to see what I have' (Kuga 2011).

A large amount of time and activity in the scene is seen to be an important marker of commitment for modders, as opposed to other activities they could do, as Squigly reveals: 'It took me nine months to build this desk. Basically it was Saturdays only. The free time that you do have you kind of pour into that' (2013). There is definitely commitment in terms of money and personal preference as DAE_JA_VOO (2011) comments:

> I spend the R4000 or R5000 on a watercooling system not because it'll allow me to overclock[6] my machine further, bringing me higher performance, but rather because I think it looks good. It's a big price for aesthetics, but that's more important to me than performance.

As a show of commitment to the practice of modding a large amount of time and activity in the scene is seen to be an important marker of commitment for modders. This reinforces the notion that commitment is a valuable marker of subcultural substance felt by members:

> That there is a community there is no doubt. Do I feel I belong to it? No I don't. I am not nearly active enough, mod enough or contribute to modding sites to consider myself a member of said community (Orihalcon 2011).

---

[6] A term used to describe a computer user making their computer components (CPU, RAM, Graphics cards e.t.c.) ran at above specification. Arguably it is a form of modification, as people manipulate the hardware in order to get more performance.

Orihalcon's comments relating to *levels* of involvement is useful in telling us they do not see themselves as 'full on' modders as they do not mod or contribute enough and are thus not as committed.

This leads to an important practice witnessed in the online space; a lot of time was spent *talking* about modding within the Carbonite modding community via build logs[7]. Squigly's build log on Carbonite (http://www.carbonite.co.za/f27/omega-desk-april-2012-a-28683/) ran from April 2012 through to January 2013, showing early stages of his creative work (**Image 6**) to its final completed form (**Image 7**). This build log was updated regularly in terms of progress and a compelling dialogue developed with other modders and non-modders targeting problems, tips, solutions or adjustments, and more personally for the modder, garnering general praise and admiration.

Image 6

Image 7

---

[7] A build log is often a detailed online blog (on a forum, personal website etc.) that show the early conceptions or ideas for a mod and then the different stages of a mod build- from its early stages to its finished state, usually accompanied by many pictures detailing the stages.

Regarding this aspect of sociality witnessed online, Squigly (2013) speaks of the shared commitment he witnesses when starting build logs and the responses from modders and non-modders: 'Look at how we interact really on the forums. It's generally just a good group of guys that want to see something come together and are willing to put in their two cents you know'.

Activities that show heightened commitment are also seen in the shopping habits that would seem extremely outrageous for anyone not within the subculture: 'I'm still not done modding my chassis[8] yet though. Still need more stuffs {*sic}* that I can't find in SA. I need to import from USA which is gonna cost me R1900 odd' (Kuga 2011). Kuga is willing to import his desired components, as opposed to 'making do' with what is available locally to personalise his PC. Respondents did realise that their daily life activities are influenced in different degrees depending on their level of commitment to the modding practice:

> As for expenditure…oh yes. Dremel[9] disks, engraving bits, motor brushes, paints, etc etc. It definitely affects shopping habits and what you look at in a shop. The more serious you take modding the more it impacts general day to day activities (Orihalcon 2011).

From these comments we see that commitment within the practices of modding pervades all areas of the respondents' lives. High levels of commitment were shown by the modders. The subculture of case modding did indeed influence aspects of their everyday lives, be it in terms of money, time spent doing it, interacting with other like-minded people, shopping habits and limiting participation in other activities.

Autonomy: Commerce & Media

Hodkinson distinguished between subcultural forms and non-subcultural forms of media and commerce. There were not many instances that subcultural commerce and its role were discussed in the interviews, and perhaps this is due to the perception that 'there are not many modders in the country anyway' (DAE_JA_VOO, 2011). Kuga (2011) commented on the

---

[8] Formal terminology for computer case.

[9] Compact cutting tool.

lack of modder-supporting enterprises which supply modding equipment in South Africa: '6 fans and pre-sleeved cable extensions...can't find them anywhere in SA which sucks so much .... I've spoken to most of the distributors, they can't help me either'.

Similarly Squigly (2013) mentions with regard to the small size of the community: 'I mean there isn't a very large modding, local community. There are quite a few guys on carbonite. There's not many other local spaces really'. These comments point out that there seems to be a small amount of local South African modders and also consequently not much formal subcultural modder-focused infrastructure to support a subculturally run economy. An intriguing aspect that was brought up was the robust second hand 'e-commerce' market place for computer hardware on the Carbonite website. As Squigly (2013) commented:

> So with it [modding] being kind of hand in hand with the second hand forum a lot of guys are then able to go out and purchase some of this equipment second hand and then build some of these machines and...it kind of gives them that little bit of extra resource to pour into it as opposed to buying all their stuff new...it's a good symbiosis of the two really. The second hand and the modding, they play well into each other.

As this shows, there is a small degree of subcultural commercial enterprise associated with the wider computer hardware enthusiast market, something possibly akin to the findings made by McRobbie (1997) that the development of punk and hippy subculture was commercially supported by subculturalists' entrepreneurial involvement in a robust second hand rag market. Thus there does seem to be an autonomous space of economic activity witnessed as there are low levels of second hand trade in which modders can buy components from other modders or sometimes non-modders.

An intriguing nexus was reached in the subcultural and non-subcultural commercial space. It must be noted that of the modders involved in this study, only two have attained some sort of commercial reward related to modding (DAE_JAA_VO 2011 and Squigly 2013). As such, within the South Africa mod scene observed in this study, the participants are not what we would call 'subcultural producers' in that their subcultural practice was not readily transferable into a subcultural commercial space. What was

observed, however, was a general sense of pride was associated with subcultural capital and status generation when a computer manufacturer borrows ideas developed by modders. As Squigly (2013) points out:

> I think it's excellent really .... A lot of people will just buy a case and 'oh well that's what it allows me to do' and they just move ahead with it. Where modders then say 'hang on that doesn't work for me, change it'. And the fact that they then try and incorporate it into their final products shows that they actually do listen to the community. They see value in some of the stuff these guys do and try incorporate it.

Similarly expressed by DAE_JAA_VOO (2011):

> They've adopted what we've done on a MASSIVE scale. All high-end 'gaming' cases have the mods we used to do ourselves. They all have windows, lights, colourful fans, etc. Many of them even have provision for modding that WILL be done, like they might have holes at the back for watercooling tubes to go through. So yes, they've adopted what we've done.

This does not at all infer that commercialization was rejected by the modders; in fact commercially acquired rewards for modding were talked about positively: 'Some case modders are even lucky enough to get involved directly with these case manufacturers' (DAE_JAA_VOO: 2011), and similarly expressed by Orihalcon (2011): 'In fact there was a modder who had his case design bought by Lamptron a few months ago – and this will be Lamptron's first PC case'. Thus there are some cases in which subcultural commercial enterprise is entered into. However there does not seem to be some vague notion of 'resistance' to incorporation in their activities, but a subcultural understanding that commercial incorporation validates their status standing amongst each other and amongst the wider computer hardware enthusiasts. We are indeed a great distance from Hebdige's (1979) notion of subculture as 'resistance' to capitalism.

Thus there is a role subcultural commerce plays in the South African modding scene; instead of a more or less subculturally focused commercial infrastructure, there are micro level commercial interactions between

modders on the online second hand market place whereby modders and non-modders can buy and sell parts from each other. **Image 8** is an example of what the second hand 'market' looks like and where members (modder and non-modders) can sell and or buy parts. More importantly though, in the findings, there were overwhelming positive views expressed by modders over commercial incorporation of their designs. This arguably insider perceived incorporation is used by the modders to reinforce their notions of creative and commercial autonomy and distinction from the case and hardware manufacturers as well as other from computer hardware enthusiasts.
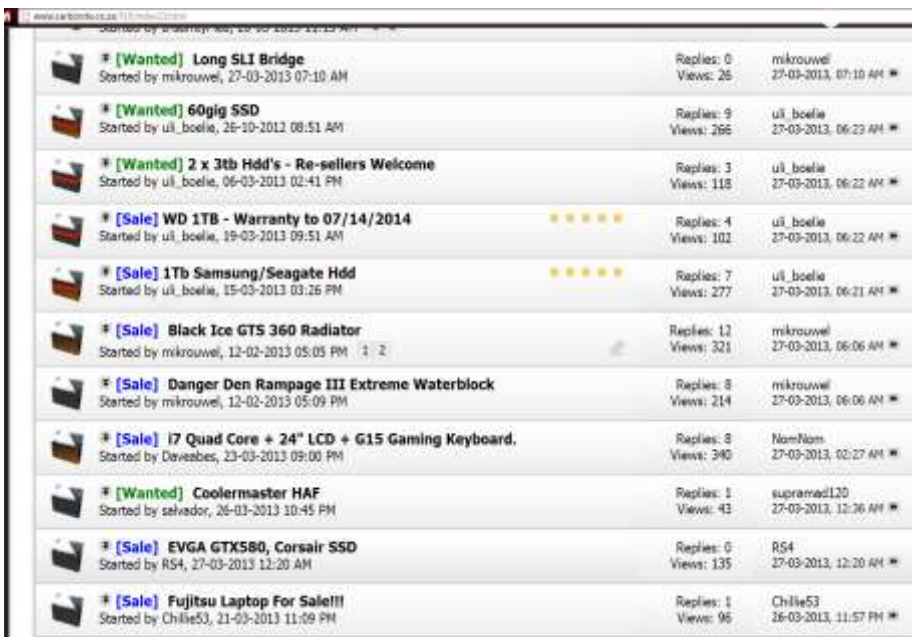

Image 8

Although Hebdige only saw media involvement in subcultures as a later intrusion by the dominant system to ideologically neutralize them, I am more drawn to Thornton's more recent work, which explicitly challenged Hebdige by pointing out the incessant media presence in subcultures,

including the important role of defining subcultures, as, in her example *Face* magazine did with regards to clubbing (1996).

With modders the role of the media has become even more central, because modding is a child of the digital age, not only because it is focused on computers, but because almost the only space where modders congregate as an active, participant community is online on dedicated web-sites. The Internet creates the meeting space for modders, and provides them a platform – a forum - for constant interaction. The website Carbonite Classifieds (www.carbonite.co.za) is a locally (South African) owned and run forum primarily dedicated to the second hand reselling of computer hardware and electronics. There are sections relating to modding, but it is wholly a sub-section of the wider website community:
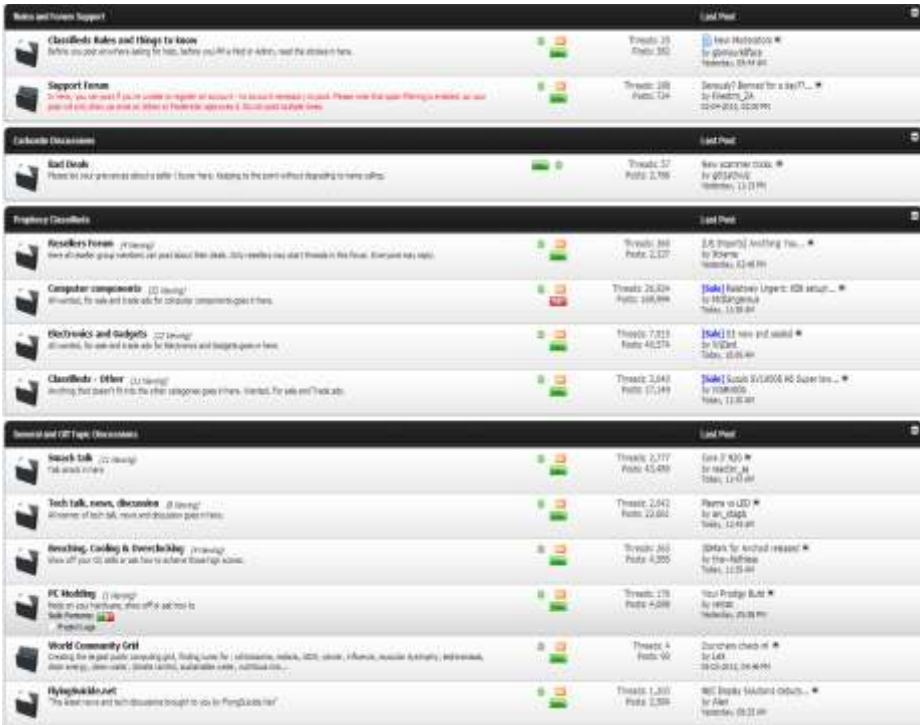

Image 9

Regardless of its 'small' footprint in relation to the wider forum, the modding community in South Africa seems to regard it as 'their' local virtual space; as was mentioned earlier Squigly (2013) believes that there is not a large local modding community. Arguably then, the internet media of Carbonite has provided the *only* realisable platform from which the geographically spaced modders (Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth, Stellenbosch) can come together, forming a local 'virtual community' to share and exhibit their interest in modding. Arguably there are more locally realised modding activities and sociality in each of the cities these participants hail from, but as Hodkinson (2002:28) remarks, the 'translocally' consistent nature of subcultural formations is a marker of subcultural substance. Carbonite seems to have embodied the ideas of a virtually realised translocal community of modders.

The participants used Internet media in a variety of ways for personal subcultural enhancement as well to grow and sustain the subcultural community. All of the participants have used the Internet media to exhibit their modifications (and often the progress of them), discuss their ideas, borrow modding ideas from other modders, and generally to get praise and recognition for their accomplishment from others.[10]What is also occurring here is a form of 'subcultural incorporation' so to speak, whereby modders look to other modders' works to incorporate some aspect of it into their design. As Squigly (2013) commented on his use of forums like Carbonite, 'I frequent them quite a bit and comment on a lot of the other guys builds. Get a lot of inspiration from their builds as well'. Similarly Kuga (2011) says: 'I build what I think looks good. I see some ideas on the [inter]net floating around. Take them and personalize them to my own taste'.

---

[10]Orihalcon build log - http://www.carbonite.co.za/f27/project-orihalcons-uv-cosmos-12190/

Squigly build log- http://www.carbonite.co.za/f27/omega-desk-april-2012-a-28683/

Kuga's build - http://www.carbonite.co.za/f27/project-kugas-custom-haf-21557/

DAE_JAA_VOO-
http://www.thebestcasescenario.com/forum/showthread.php?t=9156

As **Image 10** shows, there is a large amount of threads displaying modders modified PCs as well as threads with discussion topics centred on activities and help relating to modding.
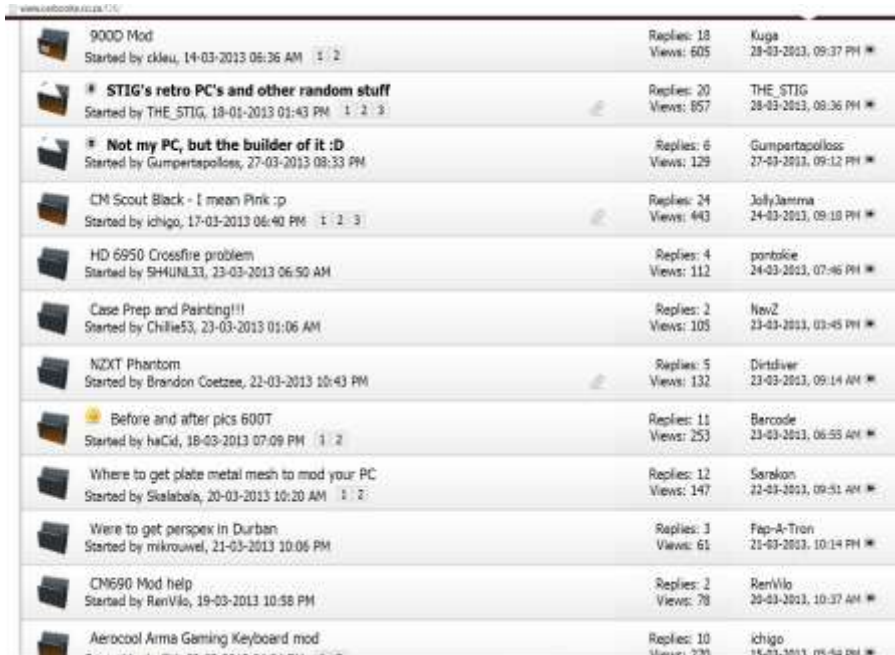

Image 10

Media was often used by the modders as a means to learn about new mods or to get advice: 'I do have sites and projects that I actively follow. Whether it is to admire the skill or the originality in the mod itself, or sometimes both, it's good to have places where you can go for inspiration and advice' (Orihalcon 2011). Orihalcon's comments reveal an acknowledgment that subcultural Internet media related to modding is an important space to learn new skills:

> I have a few choice blogs of personal modders that I follow and frequent the bigger sites that have large modding communities. I love

looking at mods – no matter how big or small as there is always something you take away from it; weather {sic} it's creating a unique paint pattern, a way to hold a dremel or a design choice, there is always something to learn and enhance your own skill set with (Orihalcon2011).

DAE_JA_VOO (2011) commented that, 'keeping up with modding was a matter of staying in the community. Forums, websites, etc, where other modders show their work and chat about things to do - that's absolutely the best way to keep up'. Thus Internet media, from the participant's point of view, does play a central role for the upkeep and maintenance of the modder community.

Within the Internet space of Carbonite Classifieds, a subcultural community was brought to life and sustained through the constant conversations between members, which produced meanings which defined the nature and limits of a South African modding subculture. Thus media was used to enhance the subculturalists' participation and construction of the subculture; arguably a case can also be made that without the media format afforded by the Internet this subculture would not exist in its current form: it is in many respects a virtual subcultural community.

Conclusion

The results revealed that modders do seem to constitute a subculture of substance when applied to Hodkinson's model. It was found that modders actively and creatively consume computer cases as a cultural resource to produce 'consistently distinctive' pleasing meanings related to computer modding. There was a display of similar values and tastes in regards to case modding and what constituted a 'mod' as well as an understanding that it was a distinct cultural activity compared to other cultural activities. The modders showed a subjective understanding of their identity; one informed by shared group identification with insiders as well as recognizing difference from outsiders. Crucially, in one of the cases a point was made whereby the applicability of a *gamer* identity to the study of modders was limited. The commitment indicator showed that modders, instead of fleetingly partaking in the practice, invest large amounts of their time, money and online and offline

activities related to modding. Importantly it was observed that modders emphasised concerted and dedicated participation in the modding community was a requirement to be a modder. On the autonomy front we see that the media of subcultural internet via visiting websites, blogs and creating personal build logs are crucial not only to maintain and grow the 'community' of modders but also is used by modders to great effect by observing and using other modders' ideas and builds into their own designs- possibly a protean form of 'Subcultural incorporation'. With regards to the niche commerce associated with modding in South Africa, there are some links made between sustaining the modding scene via a second hand marketplace. However, as noticed in this study there does not seem to be any case modder enthusiast-run commercial infrastructure in South Africa.

For the subculturalist analysts of CCCS, subcultures were flamboyant youthful eruptions of cultural resistance in an otherwise drab world of mass uniformity, optimistic signs that, with the working-class now almost entirely incorporated into the logic of capitalism, opposition to the System was still possible. Thus these subcultures such as punks were romantically drawn as cultural warriors heroically disrupting the sign systems of late capitalism before surrendering to the twin assaults of corporate commodification and ideological neutralization. In this period of the 1960s and 1970s, 'culture' was still understood in the modernist manner as an autonomous terrain from which resistance to the capitalist economy could be launched, and yet all too soon, as Jameson argued (1991), the postmodern was upon us, and the erstwhile autonomous spaces of the 'cultural' and the 'economic' fatally merged, obliterating all possibility of cultural critique: capitalism, he argued, had colonized everything.

And so subcultures in the 21st century no longer accept a call to arms, but are instead more readily described, as in my study, as 'subcultures of consumption', a phrase Jameson would understand all too well: communities gathered in fetishistic celebration of a commodity, as in the Harley Davidson motorbike subculture famously identified by Schouten and McAlexander (1995). But is there room for a less pessimistic narrative of the present, read through the prism of subculture theory, and, in this particular case, of modders?

I believe there is, because if there is now no 'outside' to capitalism, then ordinary people are increasingly demanding that it operate more in *their* interests, as in the globally burgeoning 'ethical consumption' movement,

where consumers will only buy goods from corporations if they treat their workers, suppliers and the environment decently. This may not be a revolutionary politics, but, unlike revolutionary politics, it is a politics of the possible. Moreover, in our example of modders trading their computer parts in an online micro-market, we can see in a small way of how ordinary people actively use capitalism to work for themselves, rather than being mere passive victims of its perfidy. As Hodkinson has shown with regard to Goths (2002), subcultures create their own autonomous micro-economic climates, where the goal is not the endless generation of exchange-value but the sustaining of a subcultural existence.

But if the modernist study of subcultures assumed a grey world of passive masses against which cells of rebellious youth seemed so attractive, postmodernism has borne witness to the emergence of the ordinary 'active consumer', who actively appropriates commodities to re-signify them in the autonomous cultural language of the people, fabricating in the process what Fiske (1989) understands as a properly 'popular culture' 'from below'. And in these very actions – whether it is making a YouTube send-up of Lady Gaga, writing a Harry Potter short story involving gay romance, 'role-playing' on Twitter, or modding your computer – ordinary people are asserting their desire, as Henry Jenkins (1992) argues, to be part of the *production of culture* itself. In this emerging *participatory culture* (Jenkins: 1992), above all revealed in the user-generated content of the Internet, our modders are exemplary, a subculture of active and creative consumers who also interactively use the Internet to construct new forms of virtual sociality, a world of localized meanings entirely envisioned 'from below' and sustained 'from below' by nothing more than the affective commitments of its members. It is therefore also a rigorously democratic world, held together by the voluntary consent of its members – a participatory culture in a deep and convincing sense. That, it seems to me, is the grounds for a more optimistic appraisal of the postmodern than Jameson was willing to allow.

References
Primary Resources

DAE_JA_VOO 2011. Instant Messaging Interview. [Interview] 10 November 2011.

Kuga 2011. Instant Messaging Interview. [Interview]. 6 November 2011.
Orihalcon 2011. Instant Messaging Interview. [Interview]. 8 November 2011.
Squigly 2013. Verbal Online Interview. [Interview] 23 March 2013.

Secondary Sources

Bennet, A. 1999. Subcultures or Neotribes? Rethinking the Relationship between Youth, Style and Musical Taste. *Sociology* 33, 3: 599-617.

Bennet, A. & K. Khan-Harris 2004. Introduction. In Bennet, A. & K. Khan-Harris (eds.): *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Braun, V. & V. Clarke 2006. Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, 1: 77-101.

Brenner, M.E. 2006. Interviewing in Educational Research. In Green, J.L., G. Camilli & P.B. Elmore (eds.): *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research.* 3rd Edition. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

Colwell, B. 2004. The Zen of Overclocking. *Computer* 37, 3: 9-12.

Cova, B.., R.V. Kozinets & A. Shankar 2007. Tribes, Inc.: The New World of Tribalism. In Cova, B., R.V. Kozinets & A. Shankar (eds.): *Consumer Tribes*. London: Butterworth-Heinemann.

De Certeau, M. 2002. Chapter 6: General Introduction to *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In Highmore, B. (ed.): *The Everyday Life Reader*. London: Routledge.

Dovey, J. & H.W. Kennedy 2006. *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media. Issues in Cultural and Media Studies.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Fiske, J. 1989. *Understanding Popular Culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Gelder, K. 2007. *Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice*. London: Routledge.

Hall, S. & T. Jefferson (eds.) 2006. *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain.* Second Edition. London, New York: Routledge.

Hebdige, D. 1979. *The Meaning of Style*. London and New York: Routledge.

Hesmondhalgh, D. 2005. Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above. *Journal of Youth Studies* 8, 1: 21-40.

Hodkinson, P. 2002. *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture*. Oxford and New York: Berg.

Hodkinson, P. 2004. The Goth Scene and (Sub) Cultural Substance. In Bennet, A. & K. Khan-Harris (eds.): *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hodkinson, P. & W. Deicke (eds.) 2007. *Youth Cultures: Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes.* London: Routledge.

Jagose, A. 2003. The Invention of Lifestyle. In Martin, F. (ed.): *Interpreting Everyday Culture*. London: Hodder Arnold.

Jameson, F. 1991. *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso.

Jenkins, H. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

Kozinets, R.V. 2002. The Field behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities. *Journal of Marketing Research* 39, 2: 61-72.

McArthur, J.A. 2009. Digital Subculture: A Geek Meaning of Style. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 33, 1: 58 - 70.

McRobbie, A. 1997. Second Hand Dresses and the Role of the Rag Market. In Gelder, K. & S. Thornton (eds.): *The Subcultures Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.

Merriam, S.B. 2009. *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation. The Jossey-Bass Higher Education Series*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Muggleton, D. 2000. *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*. Oxford and New York: Berg.

Raimondo, N. 2005. *Design Consumption and the Diffusion of Technological Innovations in LAN Gaming Culture: Considering the Potential for Subcultural Contributions to the Development and 'Humanisation' of Mainstream PC Hardware Technologies*. A Thesis Submitted in partial fulfilment of the Requirements of University of South Australia for the degree of Master of Design, University of South Australia.

Sassatelli, R. 2007. *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Schouten, J.W., D.M. Martin & J.H. McAlexander 2007. The Evolution of a Subculture of Consumption. In Cova, B., R.V. Kozinets & A. Shankar (eds.): *Consumer Tribes*. London: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Schouten, J.W. & J.H. McAlexander 1995. Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers. *Journal of Consumer Research* 22, 1: 43-61.

Straw, W. 1991. Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music. *Cultural Studies* 5, 3: 368-388.

Thornton, S. 1996. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Willis, P. 1978. *Profane Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

WIllis, P. 1990. *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young*. Boulder: Westview Press.

Williams, P.J. 2011. *Subculture Theory: Traditions and Concepts*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Yin, R.K. 2011. *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*. New York: Guildford Press.

Online
Simon, B. 2007. Geek Chic: Machine Aesthetics, Digital Gaming, and the Cultural Politics of the Case Mod. *Games and Culture* 2, 175: 175- 193. Available at: http://gac.sagepub.com/content/2/3/175. (Accessed on 11 October 2011.)

Scacchi, W. 2010. Computer Game Mods, Modders, Modding, and the Mod Scene. Available at: http://www.ics.uci.edu/~wscacchi/GameLab/ ModSquad-Scacchi.pdf. (Accessed on 11 October 2011.)

Images
All Images have been downloaded and reproduced with permission from Participants and Owners of websiteCarbonite Classifieds

Image 1 - *Skiet-te-kat*. http://www.carbonite.co.za/f16/skiet-te-kat-5454/. (Downloaded on 25 March 2013.)

Image 2 - *Project: Epiphany*. http://www.thebestcasescenario.com/forum/ showthread.php?t=9156. (Downloaded on 12 November 2011.)

Image 3 - *HAF 932* - http://www.coolermaster-usa.com/product. php?product_ id=2810. (Downloaded on 12 November 2011.)

Image 4 - *kug4's album: Custom HafEyefinity Setup*. http://s34.photobucket. com/albums/d101/kug4/Custom%20Haf%20Eyefinity%20Setup/?action=

view&current=IMAG0065.jpg. (Downloaded on 12 November 2011.)

Image 5 - *ForumOmega Desk April 2012.* http://www.carbonite.co.za/f27/ omega-desk-april-2012-a-28683/index27.html. (Downloaded on 25 March 2013.)

Image 6 - *ForumOmega Desk April 2012.* http://www.carbonite.co.za/f27/ omega-desk-april-2012-a-28683/index2.html. (Downloaded on 25 March 2013.)

Image 7 - *Omega Desk April 2012.* http://www.carbonite.co.za/f27/omega-desk-april-2012-a-28683/index27.html. (Downloaded on 25 March 2013.)

Image 8 - *Forum: Computer Components.* http://www.carbonite.co.za/f10/ index13.html. (Downloaded on 04 April 2013.)

Image 9 - *Carbonite Classifieds.* http://www.carbonite.co.za/forum.php . (Downloaded on 04 April 2013.)

Image 10 - *Forum: PC Modding.* http://www.carbonite.co.za/f26/ . (Downloaded on 03 April 2013.)

Marco Gennaro Bozza
Postgraduate Student
Media & Cultural Studies
University of KwaZulu-Natal
mbozza1@gmail.com