Snacking Gamers

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The digital games have become a major industry during last decades, and game-playing appears as an important leisure-time hobby for millions of consumers worldwide. In addition to playing at home, the serious gamers participate in LAN parties to join as a community of gamers for a weekend long event. While the popular culture connects gaming with the junk food and in many gaming events this seems to be true, we argue that this is just a half-truth. In this work-in-progress paper, we examine how the serious gamers eat during and outside the gaming events in relation to their mundane snacking practices. We introduce our research approach and the goals for a study that conducted in two LAN (Local Area Network) parties in Finland by observing and interviewing the participants (n=45). We aim to enrich existing discussions on the digital game-playing, eating practices, (un)healthy snacking and serious consumer communities.

Keywords: Digital game-playing, Serious gamers; LAN party; Snacking; Consumer communities; Eating practices

Introduction and Background

The digital gaming has become one key sectors of the entertainment industry and hobby for millions of consumers. For many of the game-players, it represents a central life interest, and could be characterised as a serious leisure (Stebbins, 1982). These *serious gamers*[1] join together as *consumer tribes* that are seen to exist when members identify with one another, have common experiences, emotional commitments and practice collectively constructed actions that are enabled through commercialized goods (Stebbins, 2001; Cova & Cova, 2002; Syrjälä, 2016). Consumer tribes gather together and disappear unpredictably (Maffesoli, 1996), and for this, consumption is employed as it offers "linking values", ways to construct connectedness to other tribe members (Cova, 1997). In gaming community, such linking values may consist of the shared interest in game-playing itself, games being played, shared symbols and consumption practices.

The popular culture seems to connect gaming with the junk food and unhealthy eating by large, and this is often supported by prior research (e.g. Green & Guinery, 2006; Cronin & McCarthy, 2011). For instance, Cronin & McCarthy (2012) found that in order to make gaming experience as complete, such event needs to include eating hedonistic and energy-boosting snacks and socializing with peers. Furthermore, Cronin & McCarthy (2011) claim that serious gamers snack in unhealthy and hedonistic way as a social rite and an expression of rebellion behavior.

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[1] The concept does not refer here to 'serious games' meaning games that are used for instance in education and in health-care, but a type of players seriously involved in this activity. Term 'core gamers' has also been used in popular discussion.

Taking into account the popularity of digital game-playing, in particular within young consumers (Mäyrä et al., 2016), there is clearly a need for further studies on the topic. Indeed, there are emerging notions that the intersecting of digital game-playing and snacking practices doesn't always involve unhealthy eating, especially in the case of casual playing (Syrjälä et al., 2017). Therefore, to get more multisided picture, we delve into serious gamers snacking practices. In this, we participate into discussions on how different consumption practices merge together within consumer tribes, and as suggested by Seo & Jung (2014) examine game-playing in relation to different social practices to get more comprehensive look of the consumer engagement in this pursuit.

Research Frame and Methodology

In order to study how snacking practices emerge in serious gamers' tribes, we participated into LAN (Local Area Network) events. In these events, the gamers gather together, for example for over weekend to play multiplayer games. The events usually organize a variety of gaming competitions and other side activities, such as shared pizza orders. We participated in two LAN events in Finland in spring 2017: Pixelity in Seinäjoki and GIGAb1t in Loimaa. Both events had about one hundred participants between 10 and 38 years. Three researchers took part in Pixelity and two in GIGAb1t. In order to get a full understanding of the game event, the researchers stayed in the locations during the whole weekend, except for the very late night hours.

During both events a multiplicity of data was generated. The participatory observation was carried out in two ways. Firstly, the researchers wrote field notes, took photographs and video material of everything happening in the event, however paying special attention to eating and snacking practices. Researchers did not engage themselves in gaming, only in watching others play, so the participatory nature of observation was non-active. Secondly, structured observations were conducted as the researchers walked around the area and made systematic notes on the snacking situations to the spreadsheet template. In addition to observations, a number of participants were interviewed (20 in Pixelity and 25 in GIGAb1t). The interviews were arranged in more peaceful area outside the main gaming zones. Interviews were recorded, videographed and later transcribed.

Both the observations and interviews were conducted on topics such as social interaction while playing, playing occasions, game-playing motivations, and eating and snacking. For the current purposes, we focus on our data in relation to the following questions:

- What kind of snacking practices LAN party participants carry out during the event?
  - Do these practices differ from they snacking practices when gaming outside LAN party environment?
  - Do these practices differ from they daily eating practices?
- What kind of meanings the LAN participants attach in eating and snacking in general?

In the next phase of the research, the data sets are further analyzed. The goal of our analysis is to explore the variability on eating practices in different eating situations, in what ways healthy and/or unhealthy food and eating appears, and the daily ponderings for the food choices. Also, the data is interpreted in terms of finding out the variety of ways serious gamers' view the gaming itself, possible tribe memberships, and the roles food plays in these participatory actions. Further, interest towards

gaming streams and competitive gaming is analyzed since these might contribute in gamers' eating behaviors.

Further Work

In this work-in-progress paper, we have presented a research setting in which we investigate the eating practices of the serious gamers. Next, the data generated in two Finnish LAN events is analyzed 1) to find out habitual patterns regarding eating practices of serious gamers, and 2) to relate it with the findings from previous research on the digital game-playing, eating practices, (un)healthy snacking and serious consumer communities presented at the beginning of this paper. We anticipate that the results will increase the knowledge on how the serious gamers carry out social practices, and open up more comprehensive interpretations on gamers eating practices than just unhealthy, energy-boosting snacking.

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