

Spring 5-17-2013

# Composing a Gamer: A Case Study of One Gamer's Experience of Symbiotic Flow

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## ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, *COMPOSING A GAMER: A CASE STUDY OF ONE GAMER'S EXPERIENCE OF SYMBIOTIC FLOW*, by HEATHER LYNN LYNCH, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty. The Dean of the College of Education concurs.

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Heather Lynn Lynch

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## ABSTRACT

### COMPOSING A GAMER: A CASE STUDY OF ONE GAMER'S EXPERIENCE OF SYMBIOTIC FLOW

by  
Heather L. Lynch

Built upon symbiotic flow, that is a merging of flow theory (Csikzentmihalyi, 1975) and situated cognition (Gee, 2007) this dissertation presents the findings from a 6-month qualitative study of an elite gamer and his practices and experiences with video games. The study used mediated discourse analysis and case study methods to answer the following question: What does it mean to be an elite gamer, to one life-long player of video games? In addition, the following sub-questions were considered: a) What aspects of elite gaming are important and meaningful to one particular gamer? b) What moments of play does this gamer identify as significant? c) What does sustained play look like for one him?

Data sources included interviews, observations of significant gaming (that is gaming in heightened states of enjoyment and success), observation de-briefs, co-analysis interview, and a research journal. The researcher coded observational data for elements of symbiotic flow and in response to interview data. Data are presented in narrative, expository, and graphic forms across the study. This inquiry has resulted in the creation of the Model of Nested Transaction in order to articulate and understand the nature of significant gaming experiences. Additional significant findings include: a) Time is the primary resource and commodity in this particular player's elite gaming world, because it represents a level of dedication and insider status; b) this gamer values particular affordances in his gaming, namely experiences that develop knowledge and skills that can then be applied instantaneously in gaming contexts and be harnessed for longitudinal

participation; c) video games provide the participant, and gamers like him, with possibilities for greatness, an aspect of his identity that is both critically important to him and often strikingly absent outside of games. The study argues for productive consideration of video games as a mediational tool of both meaningful learning and powerful identity exploration.



COMPOSING A GAMER: A CASE STUDY OF ONE GAMER'S  
EXPERIENCE OF SYMBIOTIC FLOW

by  
Heather L. Lynch

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the  
Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Teaching and Learning  
in  
the Department of Middle-Secondary Education and Instructional Technology  
in  
the College of Education  
Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA  
2013

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have been blessed by a flock of friends, family, and mentors who have supported me through the strikingly personal endeavor of writing a dissertation like this. I would like to thank all of those who have cheered me on through this journey, sometimes offering an ear to bend, a hot cup of coffee, a shoulder to cry on, or a word of encouragement.

I would like to thank my dissertation chairs, Drs. Teri Holbrook and Peggy Albers, who have thoughtfully, patiently, and relentlessly read through multiple drafts, always with an eye towards possibility. Both have enriched my thought and practices, challenging me to keep the implications of my words in the forefront of my mind. I have been constantly impressed by their faith in me, which I will never forget.

I am grateful to my entire dissertation committee: Dr. Lynee Gaillet, for her ever pragmatic, yet critical eye, which prompted me to consider this work as just the beginning of a larger project; Dr. Flint, for her work in critical literacy and her confirming support as a committee member; and Dr. Tisha Lewis, for her work in the field of digital literacies and families, who pushed me to think critically about the implications of researching an intimate other.

Special thanks is given to Dr. Terry Fisher, who has been both a committee member and one of those essential friends, without whom, I sincerely do not know how I could have survived the grueling dissertation process. I am proud of the fact that I have refused to settle in any aspect of my dissertation. It is Dr. Fisher who gave me the intellectual freedom and courage to dream and persist. I cannot thank her enough.

To my family, I send my gratitude. To my parents, Lee and Shirley, I am thankful for their unwavering support of and persistent belief in me, as well as for instilling in me the importance of loving the work you give your life to and of taking life “day by day.” Sunday dinners with my family have been a source of renewal and reconnecting in the midst of busy weeks of writing! To my sisters, Tammy and Chris, and brother-in-law, David, thank you for listening to the hours upon hours of worries, new ideas, and timelines that have been a part of this journey. My sisters have inspired me in so many ways over my lifetime, for which I will always be grateful!

I give my sincerest thanks to my husband, John. You have been so many things throughout this journey: muse and muscle, rock and wing, ear and mouth, co-pioneer and frontier. You have picked me up countless times, dusted me off, and refused to see anything but greatness. You have made it all a joy. Thank you.

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## GLOSSARY

- A/S/L:** An abbreviated form of “Age/Sex/Location;” this is a commonly used phrase used by gamers to flirt and learn about important data information from another player. It is often used to antagonize others.
- Avid Gamer:** A gamer who plays often and enjoys a wide range of video games, within or across genres.
- BBS:** An abbreviation for “Bulletin Board System;” a predecessor to the internet in which data could transfer from modem to modem.
- Boss:** A monster in a game that typically guards either access to new levels or valuable gear for avatars to use; because they yield such high rewards, they are designed to be especially challenging, but not impossible, to beat.
- Buff:** Within a video game, a buff is a temporary enhancement cast to boost the combat or healing abilities of the avatar or an ally.
- Casual Gamer:** A gamer who enjoys video games but not as a regular aspect of his or her daily life; this gamer might play video games at parties, when visiting with a particular friend, or if a game comes out that looks especially interesting to him or her.
- Elite Gamer:** A gamer who a) plays any form of video games for regular and sustained amounts of time; b) contributes to gaming communities; c) has both breadth and depth of playing experiences; and d) are particularly successful at meeting game-related goals.



- Equip:** The act of putting gear on an avatar so that their appearance and statistics (e.g. strength, wisdom, speed, etc.) are impacted by the item.
- Greatness:** Analyzing what it takes to be the best, and then working tirelessly to get there.
- Group Chat:** Conversation that is only accessible to members of a party of players working cooperatively; conversation is typically centered on strategy, planning, or instructions from leaders, but there is often more casual conversations, especially between events.
- Guild:** An organized group of gamers who play together, building a community in which they help each other navigate a game; the lifespan of a guild may last from a few days to over a decade. Guilds are typically filled with similarly skilled players.
- Heads-Up Display:** (Also called a HUD) A display that presents data without requiring that viewers look away from their usual view points; in a gaming context, this means that players can watch the action on the screen while easily accessing peripheral information (e.g. maps, health statistics, spells to cast, etc.).
- Hit Points:** The number of damage points an avatar can take before being killed.
- Interface:** The on-screen tools players use while navigating events in the game, such as those used for equipping avatars or a map of an area directly around the avatar.

- LAN:** An abbreviation for “Local Area Network,” which allows multiple computers in a local area, such as a room or house, to interconnect for the purposes of sharing data that will allow gamers to play together.
- Leveling:** The process of completing requisite missions, combat sequences, or quests with the primary goal of progressing an avatar to a game’s maximum level.
- Message Board:** Much like a digital bulletin board, message boards are places where individuals can post questions, search for new guild members, or advertise for gear they are selling to which others respond.
- MMO:** An abbreviation for “Massively Multi-player Online” game; in these games the primary content involves playing with and against other players in environments that can sustain thousands of players at a time.
- Newbie:** (Also *newb*, *nub*, *n00b*, and *noob*) A gamer who is new to video games and has limited skills, experiences, strategies, and resources to support game play; this is often used as a derogatory term.
- Novice Gamer:** A gamer who is interested in video games but has little experience playing them. He or she has little background knowledge to support learning a game, so the process may be difficult or slow.
- NPC:** An abbreviation for “Non-Player Character;” these characters are created by the game designers and serve to usher players through the narrative of a game. They are run via artificial intelligence (AI)

- Patch Notes:** Notes released by game developers pertaining to recent updates to the game which impact how one plays or navigates the game.
- PVE:** An abbreviation for “Player Versus Environment;” this is mode of game play in which players compete with game-initiated challenges and opponents.
- PVP:** An abbreviation for “Player Versus Player;” this is a mode of game play in which players compete, as well as collaborate, with other players.
- Quest Line:** A series of linked quests.
- Raid:** An organized, cooperative event to meet an objective specifically designed to require collaboration among many players.
- RL:** An abbreviation for “Real Life.”
- RTS:** An abbreviation for “Real-Time Strategy” game; these games are typically played with no ability to pause or delay action.
- RPG:** An abbreviation for “Role Playing Games,” in which players use their avatars to take on personas of particular archetypes of characters (e.g. a brutish orc).
- Serious Gaming:** A gaming movement dedicated to using video games to comment on aspects of society, culture, or human nature with a desire to take on activist stances.

**Solo-Queue:** A situation in which a player has no guild or partner to group up with, but is randomly assigned to collaborate with another player or players to compete against opponents who are usually similarly paired.

**Tank:** A character class which is designed to take large amounts of damage in combat situations without being critically wounded, as would most other classes.

**Technophile:** One who is particularly interested, knowledgeable, and passionate about digital technologies.

**Twitch Reflex:** Reflexes in a gamer's hands that are so sensitive that one's thoughts and actions are almost perfectly in sync; a delay is almost imperceptible.

**Ventrillo:** (Also called the Vent) A client/server communication program for online voice collaboration.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

I sat in the back of my classroom flabbergasted, looking at the young man standing before me, his black hair covering half of his face. The half I could see wore a look of deep and profound boredom with our conversation.

“Well did your group complete any of the project?” I probed.

“Just the map of the theme park,” he sighed.

“Okay, well let’s see what you’ve got. Just present that portion of the project and we’ll talk about the rest after class.”

My 9th grade honors English students were presenting projects they had created in which they had to produce a map of attractions to a fictional theme park based on one of the locations in Odysseus’s travels. In groups, they had to create a map of attractions, construct a model of a theme-related ride, perform a commercial, and several other features. I had been excited to see what everyone would create, as I knew how most of the class seemed genuinely engaged in our reading of *The Odyssey*. This small group of boys was among the only students to seem utterly uninterested with the epic and now stood before me ready to present what little they came up with for their presentation.

I was floored with their “map.” One of the young men popped in a CD-ROM and clicked “play” to begin a computer-generated tour of their fictional theme park. The perspective positioned the audience on a roller coaster that provided a panoramic view of the entire park while the monsters Scylla and Charybdis tossed the cart back and forth and shot water at the viewers as they are virtually carried down the track of the ride. Instead of a physical model or map, we, as their audience, felt as though we were on this

ride via digital images. Along the virtual way, we saw a monstrous hot dog stand, to which the students/creators had added balloons alluding to the six-headed creature, Scylla. We saw the Charybdis Kiddie Pool, in which children would be “randomly sucked down into the Underworld if they got too winey”, as one student explained. The heavy-metal inspired theme music played in the background, which they explained would have been the musical selection of these two monsters, had then been a part of the soundtrack creation. I later learned that all of the technology used to power this innovative presentation was acquired through the *Rollercoaster Tycoon 3* video game (Frontier Developers, 2004).

The most interesting part of this presentation, to me as their English teacher, was the fact that it was completed at all. These three students had completed almost no reading, writing, or assignments up to that point in the semester. I simply could not find a way to engage them in the course content-- literature, writing, and reading. When I asked why a particular homework assignment was not turned in, all three cited staying up late playing video games as their reason. As I talked with them further, I learned that they were very literate individuals, spending dozens of hours a week playing video games, writing on gaming message boards, and contributing to FAQ sites about their favorite games... and were failing almost every academic class on their schedule.

As of yet, researchers, teachers, parents, and educational policy makers seem unsure what to think about the ubiquitous nature of video games. In my previous experience as a high school English teacher, I conferred with several of my students' parents who struggled to curb their children's gaming, because they would have rather their kids spend more time reading, writing, and enjoying time with friends. It seemed to me that the implied message was that they believe video games lack valuable literacy and

are played in social isolation; there is plenty of research to support this view (Bauerlein, 2008; Gentile, Methieson, & Crick, 2010; Kato & Cork, 2011). Tapscott (2009), in his bestselling *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World*, introduced his book by outlining common and persistent fears regarding particularly the younger generation's use of digital media, including video games. He posits that our society believes that this generation, what he calls the *Net Generation*, are a) dumber than their parents were at their age; b) addicted to video games leaving little time or interest in healthy, social pursuits; c) bullying peers online; d) hyper-violent; and e) slackers with an over-developed sense of entitlement, just to name a few arguments. Tapscott (2009) used the remainder of the book to offer counter-arguments as to indicators that today's youth are largely quite the opposite: civically engaged, globally and locally cooperative, facile with locating information from a variety of critically selected sources, and more equipped to advocate for themselves and others, again, just to name a handful of examples.

There is a growing body of research out there that supports the arguments Tapscott, as well as many gamers I've spoken with, raise. Researchers have argued that video games: present a variety of opportunities to read and write in novel ways (Jenkins, 2004; Hawisher & Selfe, 2004); b) that these ways of reading are, in some ways, more relevant to future goals than academic reading and writing in typically schools (Friedman, 2005); and that c) gaming is immensely and richly social (Collins & Halverson, 2009; Gee, 2003/2007; Gee, 2008).

Leading educational researchers towards a better understanding of the possibilities and limitations of video games is James Paul Gee (2007) and his text entitled *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*. In this book, Gee has explicitly argued that good video games have mastered the art of making learning

personally meaningful, purposeful, and critically engaging. He and other researchers acknowledge that learning and enjoyment are not two separate entities (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990; Pandey, Pandey, & Shreshtha, 2007; Rivera, 2009; Smith, 1998), and that video games most successfully fuse the two in powerful ways. In looking at how games simultaneously entertain and teach, Gee posed 36 Learning Principles that are enacted through video games. In articulating these principles, Gee positioned learning and gaming as grounded in identity constructing processes, semiotic domains, embodied purposes, and shared knowledges, each of which is more fully articulated below. He has argued that video games are essentially teaching instruments par excellence.

In response to Gee's studies of video games, several researchers have become interested in what these gaming experiences look like on a personal level. Hawisher and Selfe (2007), for example, have worked with graduate students to conduct over 350 life-history interviews with adolescent and adult video gamers pertaining to their interests in gaming, the development thereof, the impact of video games on their lives, and the impact of video games on their literacy habits and development. The purpose of this large scale study was to begin to compile the stories of gamers in such a way as to locate consistencies between them and Gee's observations, most of which are based on Gee's personal gaming. Several of these case studies illustrated the ways in which playing video games enhanced the participants' academic literacy in important ways by leading to greater efficacy and facility with text, both digital and print, and to more critical perspectives of text (Fleischer, Wright, & Barnes, 2007; Keller, Ardis, Dunstan, Thornton, Henry, & Witty, 2007; Smith & Deitsch, 2007). Others comment on the important role of video games in players in coming to deeper understandings of self, as individuals and as a member of particular communities and cultures, through their



gaming practices (McGaughey-Summers & Summers, 2007; Pandey, Pandey, & Shreshtha, 2007). Still others discuss the power of communities to initiate, support, scaffold, and challenge individuals throughout their gaming experiences in ways that led to meaningful experiences and personal development (Selfe, Mareck, & Gardiner, 2007; Takayoshi, 2007). Each of these themes will be further explicated in the review of literature to follow.

One might question the ways in which video games create opportunities, such as the ones just described, for gamers. Gee (2009) has outlined 13 characteristics of good games (not to be confused with the 36 learning principles), games which Gee defines as those which “represent a technology that illuminates how the human mind works” (2009, p. 22). Specifically, he argued that good games a) empower learners, b) promote problem solving, and c) foster deeper understandings both within and without games (2009). Viewing games from such a perspective may cause one to better understand Gee’s initial premise that regards video games as masterful teaching tools as well as sources of entertainment.

In considering many of the student gamers I have taught, who talked about playing video games at the cost of academic performance, who worked after school jobs with the sole intent to purchase the newest gaming systems or games, and who typically revealed highly active literate lives (often at quite critical levels), I began to wonder. I wondered what would drive gamers to so play video games not just as a hobby, but as a dedicated, intense, and lively part of their life style. In rolling this question around in my mind one night, I literally turned my head to see my husband, John, playing the newest upgrade of *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009). John is a life-long gamer who grew up in the first wave of popular video gaming and, like many of my students, was swept

away with games, putting school on the back burner for a while. In spite of skipping school and refusing to complete assignments consistently, John had always been an avid reader and writer. In addition, he established a successful career in the field of computer technology, a career founded on the very skills he established through his interests in video games. In watching John's gaming habits and experiences over the years, it began to seem as if much of them centered on the friends with whom he played and the sheer enjoyment of the challenges video games offered. I wanted to learn more about the driving force behind gamers' love of video games.

### **Overview of the Study**

This dissertation presents a qualitative case study of an elite gamer. I use the term *elite gamer* to emphasize the participant's varied, longitudinal, critical, and deeply engaged involvement in gaming communities. Elite gamers, as discussed in this study, are those who regularly play multiple forms of video games (e.g. console, computer, handheld, etc.), participate consistently in gaming communities, have extensive and deep gaming histories, and are especially knowledgeable about games. Furthermore, they are particularly successful in their gaming, leading to exceptional ranking among players in a game, multiple characters at maximum levels, and sometimes even televise their game play. Elite gamers differ from what I refer to as *avid gamers*, or those who play video games regularly and widely, but they are less invested in gaming communities. *Casual gamers* are those who may play primarily on weekends or in certain social situations, but otherwise rarely play consistently and in longitudinal communities. To my knowledge, no one has yet to consider the experiences or practices of elite gamers apart of avid or casual gamers.

This dissertation study is informed by a mediated discourse analysis (MDA) methodological framework (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) as well as theoretical underpinnings within participatory/advocacy (Creswell, 2009) and symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1969) traditions. It investigates the ways in one gamer makes meaning of his most significant gaming experiences and how those experiences have been formative to him across time. Understanding the relationship between a gamer and his games enables deeper levels of dialogue surrounding the affordances and limitations of gaming writ large, theoretical models of how we might come to talk about gaming experiences, and the impact of enjoyment on learning.

The primary question guiding this study is: What does it mean to be an elite gamer, to one life-long player of video games? In addition, the following sub-questions serve to support understandings that present complex perspectives: a) What aspects of elite gaming are important and meaningful to one elite gamer? b) What moments of play does this gamer identify as significant? c) What does sustained play look like for one elite gamer?

The participant in this study was a 36-year-old elite, life-long gamer who is intensely engaged in multiple gaming communities. Data collection occurred during a period of six months during the winter of 2011 and spring of 2012. Data included audio-recorded interviews, digital recordings of the virtual spaces that correspond to significant moments of game play, debriefing interviews as the participant narrates gaming sessions, a concluding co-analysis interview, and a researcher journal. Data was analyzed according to a recursive constant comparative method (Glasser, 1965) for axial coding, as well as according to mediated discourse analysis methods (Norris & Jones, 2005).

## **Rationale and Purposes for the Proposed Study**

There are several critical reasons as to why this study is necessary. Among them are a) gamers are more often vilified in present American schools than celebrated for the unique affordances and experiences they carry with them; b) the research community still has much to learn about what makes video games significant pursuits for dedicated gamers; c) the lack of connection between understandings of intrinsic motivation (e.g. flow; discussed below) and social aspects of gaming; d) the current disconnect between leaders in gaming communities, both nationally and internationally, and the academia; and e) a dearth of research addressing the unique practices and experiences of elite gamers. Table 1 summarizes the relationship between the rationale and purposes of this study.

Gamers in America are often caricatured by teachers, media, and parents as antisocial (Bauerlein, 2008), violent (Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004), lazy (Tapscott, 2009) and academically unsuccessful (Gentile et al., 2011). I, however, agree with William's (2007) position that the source of a great deal of social distrust of the gaming generation by policy leaders, communities, and schools is due to the fact that researchers, as well as teachers, parents, and non-gamers, still know so little about what games do to or for players. I intend for the present study to add to the construction of more robust, additive views of what gaming does to and for one particular gamer so as to honor the experiences and knowledge sets that an elite gamers bring with them into learning situations. More specifically, throughout this study, I consider the affordances and limitations of gaming experiences of the participant, so as to better understand what gaming means and looks like from his perspective.

Table 1: *Relationship between Rationale and Purposes*

Needs for the Present Study	What is the goal?
Lack of honor of gamers' gaming experiences and communities	Come to more articulately understand what gaming means and looks like from the perspective of an elite gamer
Little understanding of exactly how educational researchers and teachers might talk about and understand gaming experiences	Identify significant moments in one's gaming experience and consider affordances and limitations of them
Limited investigation as of yet of the connection between intrinsic motivation and social aspects of gaming	Suggest possible ways in which flow and social aspects work together
Current disconnect between leaders in national and international gaming communities and academia	Begin to bridge conversations among a range of stakeholders in the field of gaming writ large
Lack of consideration of practices and experiences of elite gamers in ways that distinguishes them from casual or avid gamers	Consider implications, possibilities, and trajectories of an elite gamer as regards teaching and learning in the 21 <sup>st</sup> century

In considering what video games do for and to us, I see it as important to better understand what makes gaming so enjoyable. It is no secret that gamers enjoy video game immensely. Many in American education tend to see enjoyment and learning as dichotomous (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990b). The idea seems often to be that, if one is enjoying oneself, he or she must not be accomplishing anything of worth (Smith, 1998). From such a view, most video games would of course seem positioned in opposition to learning. Such a deficit stance, however, ignores an increasingly vast body of research arguing to the opposite point—video games indeed accomplish a great deal for individuals (Gee, 2003/2007; Hawisher & Selfe, 2007; Johnson, 2008; Jones, 2003; Lenhart, 2008; McGaughey-Summers & Summers, 2007), as has been described more

fully above. The present study considers the intersection of enjoyment and purposeful work via video games in what I have called symbiotic flow with the purposes of, again, more fully understanding the games do for and to us and the ways in which the field might learn more about the relationship between learning and enjoyment.

This study intends to better understand moments of significance in one elite player's experiences with playing video games. In light of the fact that many stakeholders in American culture (i.e. teachers, parents, educational policy makers, and other gamers) might benefit from such understandings, several documents resulting from this research are intended to be accessible to both academic and popular communities. In this way, this research intends to bridge conversations already occurring around gaming, but in two very separate, parallel spaces. Put another way, game players and designers should ideally benefit from what academics are learning about the implications and impact of video games; academics are likely to benefit from the depth and complexity of the conversations occurring about real players and their experiences. These are two communities who have much to say to each other, but are currently only talking with themselves. This work will strive to begin minimizing the space between those conversations.

Finally, there is a current scarcity of research that considers gamers on a qualitative range of experiences, involvement, or investment, so that one struggles to know whether a study considers only elite, expert players, or includes those who play a few hours a week. As will be seen, my participant is deeply invested in multiple gaming communities, spends dozens of hours a week in gaming worlds, and innovates and critiques game play in powerful ways. His practices inherently differ from someone who has put in only a fraction of this level of dedication. This study takes as a major purpose a

consideration of what there is to learn about learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century from an elite player who, because of his gaming, is remarkably facile with digital tools for critical, collaborative learning.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Qualitative researchers strive to be reflective and honest about the positionality of their research, laying bear the stances and perspectives the researcher will use throughout the review of the literature as well as throughout an analysis of data (Creswell, 2009). In the following theoretical framework, I will outline the basic tenants of two theoretical lenses through which I will view the literature and data throughout the entirety of this study, including situated cognition (Gee, 2000a, 2007) and flow (Csikzentmihalyi, 1975, 1990a) theories.

#### **Situated Cognition Theory**

Researchers are beginning to acknowledge that, in addition to being entertaining, good video games provide powerful learning tools (Branscum & Quickert, 2007; Gee, 2003/2007, 2009; Hawisher & Selfe, 2007). Gee (2007) has worked to outline the theory behind why this might be so. He has outlined ways in which one's learning and experience in video games are enabled by a concept he refers to as *situated cognition*. The founding premise of situated cognition is that "...human learning is not just a matter of what goes on inside people's heads but is fully embedded in (situated within) a material, social, and cultural world" (Gee, 2003/2007, p. 9). From this lens, Gee viewed learning as embodied, explaining that all meaningful learning is acquired in order to do something. In that doing of something, Gee posited that one becomes "that kind of person who..." participates in a particular kind of experience, activity, and community, or what Gee named domains. Within a domain, participants build communities around shared

experiences, knowledge sets, languages, ideas, and values reflective of “the types of people who” engage in a certain activity (Gee, 2003/2007). These communities are called *affinity groups*. Gee (2000b) has defined an affinity group as

made up of people who may be dispersed across a large space...What people in the group share, and must share to constitute an affinity group *is allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices* that provide each of the group's member the requisite experiences (p. 105, italics in the original).

In the world of video games, there are specific communities of players (who meet in virtual and physical spaces together) who share an allegiance to particular games, genres, developers, gaming platforms, etc.; have access to games, technologies, languages, and values shared across the group; and participate in and innovate upon similar gaming experiences, routines, traditions, behaviors, and strategies.

**Identity and Learning.** Throughout Gee’s discussions of situated learning, identity is a central concept. Throughout this dissertation, I draw heavily from Gee’s (2000b, 2003/2007) articulation of identity. He defines identity as “[b]eing recognized as a certain ‘kind of person’ in a given context” (Gee, 2000b, p.99). Whether referring to one’s view of him or herself or to how others might view an individual, Gee’s construct of identity is based upon recognition first and foremost. While this may seem as though Gee argues that our identity depends upon the recognized labels placed upon individuals by other, this is not so. Gee’s language about identity reveals a large degree of one’s agency in identity construction, particularly in regards to identities constructed through learning. For example, he has talked about the fact that video games “*offer* players identities” (2009, p. 32, italics added) and about how “learners *adopt* and practice such an identity and engage in the forms of talk and action connected to it” (2009, p. 33, italics added). In both quotes, the agency is in the hands of the learners. What a game offers,



one can choose to accept or refuse; learners only engage with domain-specific identities if they choose to participate. The larger point is that one can only develop meaningful identities once he or she chooses to take on the language, beliefs, and behaviors of *the kind of person who* is part of a particular domain.

Learning is intimately tied to identity for Gee (2003/2007), because as one learns, he or she adopts different behaviors, attitudes, ways of problem solving, beliefs, values, and even language practices, all of which impact the choices one makes in interacting in the lived world . As a result of such choices, one begins to be seen as or self-identify as *the kind of person who* is a part of that domain.

For example, some gamers are particularly invested in a genre of games referred to as historical real-time strategy games in which players virtually re-live historical events and battles from different eras. Players lead, for instance, the armies of Attila the Hun through the geography of ancient China, using the same warfare technologies, navigating the same political tensions, and being held to the same social norms of that age. In response to such games, if one subscribes to Gee's view of learning and identity, players are likely to be impacted by such games as they engage in history (e.g. reading historical fiction, visit historical locations, or watching period films), view our own civilization, participate in a democracy, or consider the role and purpose of first-world militaries from perspectives different from those who do not engage in such games.

**Embodiment and Identity.** In leaning heavily on Gee's construct of identity, I must also draw from his implied emphasis on the embodied nature of both identity and learning. In explaining various ways that one might consider identity, Gee (2000b) has outlined four perspectives, each of which links identity to the state of and interpretation of the body as it is positioned within a lived world. For example, one might view identity

in terms of one's natural state, which is acted upon only by forces of nature (i.e. genetics, malformations, one's sex, whether one is a twin, etc.). From this perspective, judgments are laid upon individuals in response to *the kind of person* society or they interpret their bodies to imply. The implication is that one's body itself carries connotative meanings in particular cultures. Unlike in the case of learning and affinity identities, there are ways in which society imposes upon individuals. Examples include, "Blonds are more fun," "Men are physically stronger than women," or "Someone with AIDS is probably promiscuous." Not all identities from natural perspectives come from external sources. For example a teenage girl may come to see herself as worthless because of her interpretation of her body, whether because she views herself as overweight, not womanly enough, or a host of other possibilities. Note that these are among the basest forms of judgments individuals make about others and themselves, but the larger point is that the identities expressed here center on the interpretation of one's body in a lived and social world.

From an institutional perspective, Gee's (2000b) second perspective of identity, authorities grant particular labels upon others. Positions such as *prom queen*, *professor*, or *felon* are placed upon individuals by more powerful others, carrying with them an expectation of how individuals will act, behave, and speak. While the other three perspectives of identity position individuals in positions to control the identities they take on, there are some instances in which institutional identities are unsolicited and even ill-founded, such as identities pertaining to *convicts*, *trouble-makers*, or *dead-beat-dads*.

The discourse perspective (Gee, 2000b) is based upon recognition by others with whom one enters dialogue. These are often personality-level traits, such as *charismatic* or *dull*, both of which depends upon other's interpretations of how one presents one's self. While often these are achievement based ascriptions, as in the case of someone who

works hard to make others laugh, they may also be less intentional, as in the case of one who is naturally witty.

Lastly, quite different view of identity comes from the affinity perspective (Gee, 2000b), which is based on the shared experiences of an individual within a domain with others, which society and the individual recognize as making the him or her *the type of person* who engages in that domain. For example, Trekkies, or fans of *Star Trek*; triathletes; Mormons; researchers; and, of course, video gamers all carry with them interpretations of what it means to participate in their domain of choice, some of which are intentionally maintained by practitioners of that domain, and others which they resist actively. Again, the larger point is that it is the interpretation of their body in engaging with others that leads to the construction of identity. While I acknowledge that an entire body of literature exists surrounding embodiment and identity, I use the term *embodied identity* throughout this dissertation to emphasize the importance of the lived-body in achieving and enacting identity through its presence and interaction with others. Further review of various definitions is vastly beyond the scope of this study.

In the realm of video games, one might question exactly what a gamer is doing, if all that he or she might physically accomplish is the pressing of the same dozen buttons surreptitiously for hours. Newman (2004) began to answer this question in his description of what is involved in video game play: "Video game spaces are experienced viscerally with the whole body. The exploration of video game space is a kinesthetic pleasure. It is important, therefore, to consider the ways in which players virtually exist within these spaces" (p. 125). Gee's (2003/2007) situated cognition theory is useful in considering just that—how players navigate virtual spaces, both alone and together, in ways that teach them information and skills, as well as nurture important identities and communities

individuals engage with. Important to this discussion are the following characteristics of situation cognition theory (Gee, 2009): a) domains in which individuals actively engage in embodied ways; b) affinity groups affiliated within domains; c) social construction of knowledge; d) projective identities of affinity group members; e) critical learning processes.

### **Flow Theory**

Established by the work of Csikzentmihalyi (1975), flow is the holistic, enjoyable sensation one feels when acting with total involvement in an activity. It particularly refers to engagement with activities that Csikzentmihalyi called *autotelic*, or self-rewarding, those activities individuals pour vast amounts of time, energy, and money into with often only the experience itself as a reward. I consider video game play autotelic, since players often invest hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars into gaming, all for no other reason than to enjoy playing particular games. For example, in 2011, American gamers spent \$24.75 billion on video games (Entertainment Software Association, 2012). As of the summer of 2012, *League of Legends* was named the most played PC game in the world, with players logging in at 1.3 billion hours of game play around the globe (Gaudioi, 2012). In studying the driving force behind such extreme commitments and such enjoyable outcomes (though not specifically considering video games), Csikzentmihalyi (1975, 1990a) found eight key components of flow, which I have collapsed into five. One is said to experience flow when: a) one's attention is completely and fully focused on the activity at hand; b) one's ability is in perfect balance with the challenge of the activity so that the demands are neither too easy nor too difficult; c) one has immediate and clear expectations and feedback regarding success; d) one feels a

strong sense of control when participating in the activity; e) one “loses oneself” in the activity, often denoted by losing track of time and self-consciousness.

I believe that many gamers—elite or otherwise-- would readily acknowledge playing video games as ripe with flow experiences. Many gamers, including those from hundreds of interviews compiled by Hawisher and Selfe (2007), talk about being completely immersed in the game to the extent that nothing else seems to exist (Bissell, 2010; Journet, 2007; Selfe, Mareck, & Gardiner, 2007). Games often teach players how to play at higher and higher levels of ability, just in time for the gameplay to become more challenging (Gee, 2003/2007; Marie, 2011). At any point in time, players know what is expected of them within a game and how they are performing in relation to that expectation (Bertz, 2011; Gee, 2003/2007). Feelings of control are fostered by games in which players have a great deal of choice regarding everything from character construction to exploration within the game to choosing to quit the game altogether (Gee, 2003/2007; Jenkins, 2004; Mackey, 2007). Lastly, players often talk about their loss of self after they have played for vast amounts of time without ever realizing it (Bissell, 2010).

For these reasons, flow theory provides a lens through which to discuss the experiences and motivations for playing video games. This lens becomes even more robust as I blend this theory with situated cognition in such a way as to address a serious limitation of flow theory as it exists, namely the fact that flow is commonly discussed as an individual engagement. The founding researcher of flow, Csikzentmihalyi (1975), conducted his initial research in such a way as to frame the inquiry entirely around individuals’ experiences as if there were no community, partners, or competitors with which participants interacted with in their chosen activities, some of which included rock

climbing, chess, and basketball, all activities ripe with social involvements. Many researchers discussing flow in the context of video games have followed his lead, either ignoring social factors entirely (Chen, 2007; Smith, 2007) or even arguing that, because video games produce states of flow so well, they often lead to anti-social behaviors in avid players (Chou & Tang, 2003; Lee & LaRose, 2007). To date, there is nothing in the literature pertaining to social aspects of flow in relation to video games.

### **Brief Overview of Methodology**

In general, this study is rooted in constructivism epistemology, in which “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). This study can be best described as constructivist, rather than constructionist, due to its focus on the ways in which an individual makes meaning within the social contexts in which he participates (Vygotsky, 1978). Specifically, I draw from an advocacy/participatory framework (Creswell, 2009), which stresses the socially-situated nature of research in a way that honors and empowers participants who speak within a previously silenced community, in this case, gamers who have been typically addressed with subtractive views by educators, researchers, and society writ large. Symbolic interactionism, a second critical lens to this study, holds that meaning is constructed as humans interpret the symbols that surround them in daily life; these meanings are co-constructed through our social interactions with others (Blumer, 1969). I understand meaning to be transactional (Rosenblatt, 1978); it is neither held solely in the world nor in the individual but where the two transact. In light of these lenses, I have constructed a methodology that looks closely at how these two methods transact.

In creating an appropriate method for the purposes and investigation driving this study, I have designed a case study informed by mediated discourse analysis (MDA) methods. This approach draws from both the identity-centered aspects of gaming and the observable practices involved as well. Throughout the data sources, the focus of this study oscillates between the discreet moments of intense gaming of one gamer, and the larger, holistic understandings of his experience, values, dispositions, and identities involved. Data support an investigation of the research questions of this study pertaining to what it means to be gamer, understandings from which will add greatly to the research literature pertaining to elite video gamers and the experiences that matter to them.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

I have organized this review around the relevant guiding questions, so as to address exactly how this study fits into larger conversations in the field, where it addresses gaps in what is known, and how the questions guiding the study are suited to fill these gaps. In doing so, the following themes emerged as significant to this study: a) gamers tend to bring with them varied, unique, and valuable experiences, knowledge, perspectives, and values; b) gamers report that there are eight features of video games that make experiences engaging; c) the presence of flow and social learning are well documented in the field, yet researchers tend to approach video games from only one lens or the other. It is important to note that, within the research literature as it exists, most researchers generalize observations, experiences, and findings to gamers in general. I was unable to find any studies that differentiated between elite gamers and other kinds of gamers (e.g. casual gamers or avid gamers) to any degree. This reading has strengthened my conviction that the present study has the potential to add meaningfully to the field.

#### **Elite Gamers- Who Are They?**

53% of Americans report playing video games regularly, including 55% of men and 50% of women; younger adults (81% of adults ages 18-29) with higher levels of education (57% of Americans with at least some college education) tend to play more (Lenhart, Jones, & Macgill, 2008). Determining who among them would fall under the category of elite is difficult to measure. Indeed, simply attempting to determine definitions of what constitutes an elite gamer is a challenge, since, unlike academic domain, the genesis of terminology can be difficult to identify in the gaming world, even for words that are common to gamers' vocabularies. In response to the ways in which I



have read and heard the term used among gamers (both in publication and personal communication), I define an elite gamer as someone who a) plays any form of video games (console, computer, handheld, cell phone, etc.) for regular and sustained amounts of time, both *over* time and *at a* time; b) contributes to gaming communities in a way that impacts the gaming experiences of others (e.g. playing with established groups, contributing to gaming forums, organizing in-game events, or playing in the presence of friends); c) has both breadth and depth of playing experiences due to extensive gaming histories; and d) are particularly successful at meeting game-related goals (both personal and game-determined), often in ways that innovate gaming strategies. Elite gamers tend to have a level of seriousness about the video games they play, although they still acknowledge that games exist primarily for the purpose having fun. I understand elite gamers to differ from serious gamers, due to the rise of the serious gaming movement, in which developers and players have begun to re-purpose video games from purely entertainment-centered products to those which are designed to accomplish pragmatic goals, whether they be public awareness campaigns, job or military training, or educational simulations, as well as many other domains (Marsh, 2010). Elite gamers primarily play entertainment-centered games, but with a goal-oriented, dedicated approach. Some (though certainly not all) elite gamers are even professional players, who stream their game play live on the Internet and receive money from sponsors if enough viewers log in to watch. These professional elite gamers have found venues to turn their exceptional gaming abilities into a profitable career (Kaining, 2007); most elite gamers, however, work full-time jobs or attend school just as their peers do, all while maintaining intense devotion and in-game time logs.

In considering the kinds of gaming presented in the literature, I have come to several other classifications of gamers. Non-gamers, for example, are those who neither play nor have an interest in video games. Novice gamers are those who are interested in video games but have little experience playing them. Casual gamers are those who enjoy video games but not as a regular aspect of their daily life; they might play video games at parties, when visiting with a particular friend, or if a game comes out that looks especially interesting to them. Finally, avid players are video gamers who play often; enjoy a wide range of games, within or across genres; and view video games as a form of entertainment. The primary difference I see between avid and elite gamers has to do with competitiveness; elite gamers view games as intensely competitive, whereas avid gamers primarily enjoy problem solving aspects or narrative story lines.

The definitions above has guided the present literature review to the extent that these were characteristics I looked for pertaining to how one might begin to think about what it means to be an elite gamer. In the following review of the literature, I draw from many studies. None of them have explicitly differentiated among possible types of gamers but instead generalize so that one might easily think that all gamers do, think, engage in discourse, and construct identity in the same ways. What they do provide, however, is a foundation from which to begin to understand elite gamers as unique in their engagement and understanding of gaming. Specifically, I review studies in order to consider what has been said thus far about the ways in which gamers make meaning differently than non-gamers; the role of identity in playing video games; and the social stigmas that gamers tend to resist.

## **Gamers Construct Meaning Differently**

Marc Prensky's work in popularizing the concepts of *digital natives* has offered a possible entry point into how gamers think. He has cited several studies in the field of neuropsychology (2001b), which has come to find that the development of the human brain does not stop at any particular age, as once was thought, but rather it continues to develop in response to the stimuli surrounding an individual. Neuroplasticity refers to the ways in which one's brain can continually reorganize itself in response to those stimuli, much in the same way the muscles of a body might. The body of a swimmer looks much different to that of a ballerina, because of the ways their bodies respond to the demands of their specific endeavors. The same is true for the mind—if one spends large and regular chunks of time composing music, his or her brain will come to process the world around him or her differently than one who spends a great deal of time programing computers.

Researchers have conducted many studies presenting findings in support of neuroplasticity. For example, in one study, researchers found that the benefits of regular meditation, such as decreased anxiety, a heightened sense of well-being, or the body's ability to heal itself, are correlated to changes in the physical structure of the brain in response to meditative practices (Frith, 2007). In another study, researchers studied to participants who were blind and used echolocation, the ability to use echoes to map one's surroundings, to navigate crowded streets; an MRI revealed that visual processing centers in the brain adapted for this new skill (Thaler, Arnott, & Goodale, 2010).

Prensky posits that this foundation in neuroplasticity explains the ways in which today's youth think differently than any previous generation. He argues that today's children, teenagers, and young adults have been raised on "twitch-speed" video games,

instant access to global sources information, and multi-tasking computer use. As a result of using digital technologies, much of which connect individuals to information and others in ground-breaking new ways, our youth and young adults might be called *digital natives*, in that they speak the language of the digital, the instantaneous, the global (Prensky, 2001a). Alternatively, Prensky refers to individuals who do not engage with digital modes regularly as *digital immigrants*, whose use of literacy practices and behaviors carry with them an accent from the pre-digital age.

While Prensky's term *digital native* is widely used in the literature, I find it problematic. Firstly, the political language of *native* versus *immigrant* is troubling in an age in which American society has polarized views of what counts as a native in our borders. Secondly, a binary such as this leaves no room for that which is both immigrant and native. If one is born prior to the 1980s, yet is facile with a range of computer technologies, with the exception of any kind of video games, how shall we classify such a person? Thirdly, I agree with Bennett and Maton (2010), who posit that the wholesale adoption of Prensky's ideas is centered upon fear and assumptions.

Focusing much of their work on the inaccuracies of the *digital native* model of thought, Bennett and Maton (2010) suggest several reasons why the ever-growing suspicion of digital technologies on younger generations should be disconcerting. The dramatic language used within the current discourse serves primarily to ensue "academic moral panic" about the profound changes and rigid division among the generations (Bennett et al 2008). It serves only to further polarize individuals, communities, and academic thought. They further argue that this discourse is constructed upon a kind of "historical amnesia" that obscures past precedents for contemporary change. For example, in the 1950s, education was flooded with concerns about a growing student

body that was exposed to new forms of commercial culture with the advent of televisions in the home. In our own time, however, researchers rarely look backwards for precedents in similar types of technologically ethical questions or challenges. Instead, we are left with a sense of such issues as having no precedence, no past from which to learn, which in turn can nurture that academic moral panic. Additionally, Bennett and Maton (2010) voice a concern for the “certainty-complacency spiral,” in which terms such as *digital native* are adopted without question. “This complacent, uncritical acceptance of the veracity of such claims in turn encourages further certainty, as the number of publications adopting the term grows” (p. 328). They argue that the field would do well to more critically evaluate the use of such language, as well as to look at what actual research of digital learning tells us about its impact on children and adults alike.

It is worth noting that, since the popularization of the concept of digital natives, Prensky has revised his work. One of his more recent works, for example, considers the idea of *digital wisdom* (Prensky, 2012), a concept that moves away from fear-based dichotomies and towards a flexible view of individuals using digital technologies to access to information and in ways that are responsible, meaningful, and ethical. Clearly his thinking has continued around these ideas; sadly, many in the field continue to carry the problematic banner of digital natives.

Taking Bennett and Maton’s advice, I turn to what the research says about how individuals read, write, and think in digital spheres. The literature is largely unanimous that, regardless of generational dispositions, individuals handle literacy differently in digital texts than print-based texts. In the field of literacy, for example, reading is regarded as *multimodal*, a term Kress (2003) described as “the use of different modes of communication to create an effect, the point being that each mode offers certain potential

meanings that another might not offer” (p. 107). Reading is not merely about the printed word. It is viewed as a complex interaction between form and content; so that the mode of a text carries with it meanings that enhance content in particular ways (Kress, 2003). For example, presenting instructions on how to navigate a video game in print carries different affordances and messages than the same message presented as a walk-through on YouTube. Video game designers have a wide range of possibilities for how they distribute in-game content, each of which impacts the ways in which readers/users will construct meaning.

Rowse and Burke (2009) have documented two adolescents’ engagement with online video games. Their work suggests shifting understandings and uses of multimodal texts by the gamers. Conducting a multiple case study, the researchers interviewed one male and one female about the relationships between their online reading practices on gaming sites and print-based reading practices. They also observed participants as they navigated their favorite games. The researchers noted the vast repertoire of skills involved in the digital readings in which the participants engaged, from interpreting visual clues, to mastering the nuances of subtext, to following ideas in a nonlinear fashion, to decoding print. The researchers concluded that the need for such skills arises from the multimodality of on-line texts, which incorporate visual, alphabetic, spatial, gestural, and aural cues. Participants’ use of the multiple modes of within the video game indicated to the researchers a shifting understanding of text.

One such understanding is that of reading paths. A reading path charts one’s experience of a text, outlining essentially how a text is read. For printed texts, the path is typically, though not always, linear—one reads generally top-to-bottom, left-to-right. Digital texts, including video games, leave the traditional reading path to be constructed

by the reader (Kress, 2003). For example, when players view their screens in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), depending on the context, the information needed at the moment, or changes on the display, they may first focus their attention on their health statistics, or locate enemies on the battlefield, or read the most recent chat in the text box.

The way gamers read a particular game is greatly impacted by their expectations of it. One feature unique to some avid players of video games is a strong appreciation of narrative aspects of games. For many, it is not enough to focus on winning a competition; the game must tell a story as well. For example, in her autoethnographic case study of her own gaming practices, Journet (2007) argues that video games make virtual experiences feel embodied through the narrative shape of the game. In 2002, Journet, an English teacher as well as researcher, began playing the *Myst* series during her free time in Romania as a Fulbright scholar. *Myst* (Miller & Miller, 1993) and its sequels, have been hailed as landmarks within the gaming industry, becoming the bestselling game from its 1993 release (Journet, 2007; Sengstack, 1996). She wanted to consider the ways in which narrative impacted her experience playing the games.

Based on her data, Journet noted that her gaming experiences opened her to a variety of literacies (visual and spatial) and affinity groups (online forums, gaming networks, and FAQ sites) that she had never experienced before. From the perspective of an educator, she found that it is the stories in and about games that lead to her own active learning as a gamer. Throughout her gaming experiences, she was struck by the ways in which the *Myst* series built upon, elaborated, and re-envisioned traditional narrative structures across several genres. In addition, she noted the embodied ways in which she

was a part of the storying of her experiences: unlike reading print, her responses and choices impacted the shape of the narrative.

Journet's work strongly ties in with that of Jenkins's (2004) theoretical model of the uses of narrative within video games. Arguing that video games might be understood "less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility" (p. 114), Jenkins classified four categories in which narrative functions in games. He began by describing enacted narratives, in which the player simply acts out a predictable, or even a previously published narrative as in the case of video games that simulate movies. A second category of narrative contains evocative spaces. Evocative spaces are those that build upon stories and genres common to a particular culture, such as *American McGee's Alice* (Rogue Entertainment, 2000), a deranged spin on Lewis Carroll's (1876/2004) story of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, in which Alice returns after having been committed to an asylum for the insane. In this case, the developers evoke gamers' previous understandings of the Alice narrative and alter it in unexpected ways. Rather than merely reenact the well-known novel, the player is met with innovation and novelty as Alice totes a bloody butchers knife throughout her adventures in darkly violent environments. Responding to embedded narratives is a third narrative option, in which players may be expected to either buy into or resist narrative patterns common to a culture, such as the triumph of good over evil. Players may very well choose to let evil prevail, a counter narrative that may be strongly tied to the values and understandings of success within one's affiliation group (Gee, 2003/2007). The fourth narrative posited by Jenkins is one that is emergent. Emergent narratives provide players with environments that allow for such a degree of freedom that they are at liberty to construct their own goals and enact their own stories. The *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) provides such a



narrative. Although the construct of the game dictates the skills and abilities of players' characters, the quests they choose, the sequence of adventures, the level of community engagement, and countless other choices are dependent on the player, leaving him or her to write each character's story.

Findings from Mackey's (2007) multiple case studies pertaining to recreational literacy flesh out Journet and Jenkins's discussions. Mackey observed 9 participants as they engaged with several types of text, one of which was an online massively-multiplayer on-line role playing game (MMORPG), in order to consider recreational aspects of literacy. She noted that, in regard to video game play, participants tended to develop structures of mental mapping as they entered the gaming experience. They searched for and establish some framework for organizing goals, tasks, and understandings of the game environment to orient them to the game. Additionally, many participants commented on the importance of "making the story *happen*" (p. 100, italics in the original), meaning that they saw themselves as agents through which the story might emerge. The seamlessness with which the participants were able to enter the fictional world as they searched for the story struck Mackey. Furthermore, she noticed that different participants took on different purposes within the game, some focusing on tasks, others on exploring possibilities within the environment, and still others on socializing within the game. The oscillation between narrative construction, mapping experiences, and prioritizing purposes emerge as important processes within the gaming experience, the latter two possibly existing as tools to enhance and negotiate the narrative potential within a given game (Mackey, 2007).

Another, but related, theme that emerged from the literature addresses the relationship between playing and learning. Csikzentmihalyi (1990b) commented on the tension between learning (or work) and play, saying:

Over the course of time we have separated work and leisure to the extent that now we think only unproductive leisure can be enjoyable, and productive work must necessarily be unpleasant. Nothing is further from the truth. Leisure becomes the sole source of enjoyment only when a culture loses its capacity to make everyday life enjoyable (p. 133).

The implications of these words ring true in the voice of those teachers who instruct their students to "Quit playing around and get to work." The message is one that seems to necessitate drudgery and boredom as a part of achievement and enjoyment as a part of frivolity.

Pandey, Pandey, and Shreshtha's (2007) case study, which is a part of Hawisher and Selfe's multiple case study, discussed one participant's struggle to understand a common dichotomy between the socially constructed understandings of play and learning. This participant learned at an early age that "serious learning" was often placed in opposition to play. Regardless, he was involved in one teacher's classroom that incorporated computed-based learning games to compliment her instruction, a very new practice in the Nepal of the early 1980s, becoming aware of the learning-play connection in his own life. From this experience, the participant came to recognize the ways in which learning and enjoyment, at their best, work in concert, a concept that video games epitomize.

Educational games aside, Gee (2003/2007) recognized games as first and foremost tools for learning. Before one can enjoy playing a particular game, one must learn how to play it. This is precisely where Gee has noted that video games have

innovated upon human learning in radical ways. He pointed out that “Under the right conditions, learning, like sex, is biologically motivating and pleasurable for humans...” (2003/2007, p. 29). Fusing pleasure and learning, video games are one of the few domains in which learning is expected to be enjoyable, rather than dull work—and gamers are aware of this relationship (Bissell, 2010; Pandey, Pandey, & Shreshtha, 2007).

### **Gamers Play with Identity**

When playing video games, one must necessarily negotiate identity in unique ways. As I outlined in Chapter 1’s discussion of Situated Cognition, Gee (2003/2007; 2009) has described three identities that develop in response to an individual’s involvement in any semiotic domain, but that is exemplary in consideration of elite gamers: a) Real-world identity: This is the embodied, living person that sits down to the game. With this identity come all the composite views of self that with which one engages with the world around him or her in daily life (e.g. Heather Lynch as mother, wife, researcher, student, teacher, singer, novice gamer, etc.). b) Virtual identity: This is the computer-generated avatar within the game’s environment. While individuals can customize characters in many games, its abilities, appearance, and role in the game are generally pre-designed for the player to select (e.g. Acacia, my Deamon Hunter in *Diablo III* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012)). c) Projective identity: This is the merging of the real-world and virtual identities. The two transact with each other to produce a one-of-a-kind gaming experience that cannot be perfectly replicated (e.g. Heather/Acacia as they enact identity, values, knowledge, abilities, and accomplishments in the gaming environment).

I offer a brief illustration of these three identities in action in the playing of *Splinter Cell* (Ubisoft Entertainment, 2002), an action-thriller RPG. The main character within the game, Sam Fisher, is equipped with abilities to either confront enemies and

fight, or use stealth to avoid and move on in the mission (virtual identity traits). There are some gamers who are particularly disturbed by portrayals of violence in video games (real-world identity trait). Such players choose to play Sam in such a way as to beat the game without killing a single human. In doing so, they have an additional challenge to negotiate, that of doing no harm, thereby using their computer-generated avatars to enact the values, beliefs, and skills of their real-world selves. This merging is the projective identity. (See Chapter 1's discussion of situated learning for further discussion.)

Merchant (2005) has looked at such a phenomenon, though he does not work from the projective-identity framework. Conducting a study of children's behaviors in constructing identities via email-based pen-pals, he observed that, while the digital conversations began quite formally, children attempted to locate each other in social frameworks. He discussed the ways that children enact both anchored identities (those grounded in socio-cultural contexts, e.g. gender, religion, race) and transient identities (those more mutable identities, e.g. trends, teen culture, lifestyles). For example, a pair of students worked to locate each other's gender, age, and schooling (anchored) identities first, but later spent a great deal of energy positioning themselves in terms of the clothes they wear, the music they like, and the sports they are involved in (transient). Merchant viewed the transient identities as being "co-constructed" as the students play off each other.

Gee's projective identity theory might explicate Merchant's example by arguing that anchored identities might be similar to real-world identities, in that they are grounded in the lived experiences of the individual. The transient identities, however, reflect the very mutability that Gee highlighted: individuals often have an idea in their minds of an

ideal that they and/or others have of them (virtual identity) and then they attempt to conform to that ideal (projective identity) as they further engage with others.

In addition to thinking about identity on an individual level, gamers often consider who they are in relation to video games on a global scale. One distinctively unique feature of video games is the global connectedness they foster. Some games allow players from across the globe to collaborate together in on-line games (Gee, 2003/2007; Hawisher & Selfe, 2007). In the *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), for example, one might just as easily group with individuals playing in Australia, South Korea, England, or Brazil as group with a next-door neighbor. An example addresses the Japanese tsunami in March of 2011; gamers from all over the world raised \$116, 941 for the relief efforts in Japan in a campaign called “Play for Japan” (Pereira, 2011). Campaign leaders encouraged gamers to post ads for video game-related items on eBay and donate the proceeds to the relief efforts. In addition, Yamaoka, a popular video game musical composer worked with Play for Japan to release an album, from which the proceeds contributed to the effort as well. This example suggests a global sense of community among gamers, in addition to other implications pertaining to civic involvement and outreach, which will be discuss below.

Gaming researchers have explored the role of video games in terms of cultural identity in interesting ways as well. Pandey, Pandey, and Shreshtha (2007) conducted a multiple case study centered on two participants who emigrated from Nepal to the United States as young adults, using video games as touchstones for American culture. Both participants came from settings in which print-based reading and writing were highly valued. In both cases, their parents encouraged their interest in participating in such practices for the purposes of future professional opportunities and skills. As teenagers

interested in American culture, each of the participants began to use American video games to learn English, as well as cultural norms and habits.

Similarly, Smith and Deitsch (2007) investigated issues of globalization via video games, yet they did so through a consideration of the ways in which culture is represented through gaming narratives. The participant of this case study and co-author, Eve, reflected on her gaming experience and interest in Japanese culture. Eve spent a great deal of her adolescence in America playing video games produced in Japan. To her, gaming fostered not only a love of story and reading, but also a deep interest in the history and culture producing her favorite games and animated series. As a result, she began to study Japanese language and culture to pursue a career in the Japanese gaming industry. As her studies progressed, she became aware of the ways in which games coming from Japan and based on culturally specific narrative forms are then localized for international audiences. Localization refers to the process by which a video game is manipulated to appeal to the cultural tastes of a specific market. Such localization situates games in terms of local versus global cultural norms, affirming or troubling normative behaviors and values. Eve, an active gamer herself, played games marketed both for Japanese and American audiences, noting the tensions created in the story lines as a result of localization. She tied traditional practices of close reading and critical literacy in order to make judgments on the success of a game's translation and adaptation across cultures. As an adult, Eve worked for a game localization firm in Japan, building a career upon these interests and depositions. For gamers like Eve, games are cultural products designed for specific audiences.

The previous studies demonstrate the ways in which gamers are becoming increasingly aware of video games' engagement with global and individual cultures. As

with all media, video games are windows into the values, beliefs, and norms of a given culture and even commentary thereof (Kato, 2011a). Gaming communities across the globe are creatively constructing practices to support each other, as in the case of supporting Japan's tsunami victims (Pereira, 2011). For Pandey, Pandey, and Shreshtha (2007), video games became an entrance point into a foreign society, to which the participants came to be part of. On the other hand, Eve used video games more generally to learn from the narratives used in games to better understand the values espoused in another cultures' stories and traditions (Smith and Deitsch, 2007). Whether on an individual or cultural scale, many gamers reflect on who they are in relationship to others, performing a great deal of identity work in the process.

### **Gamers Take Games Seriously**

While the casual gamer tends to turn on a game, play, log off, and not further consider the game, elite gamers are different. Tom Cadwell, an elite gamer in his own right and the lead designer of the wildly and internationally popular MMO Real Time Strategy game (RTS), *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009), shared with me his perspective as to why video games deserve serious consideration. For Cadwell, video games "offer another set of experiences and interactions to share human experiences that would be otherwise inaccessible" (personal communication, June 7, 2011). As is the purpose of all art across human history, some video games afford some consumers with perspectives, insights, dispositions, and questions centered upon how one is to live a meaningful life (Cadwell, personal communication, June 7, 2011). They do so while using the consumer him or herself as an instrument of its art: the players themselves compose the narratives, forge social bonds, and enact strategies, all of which make the art possible (Cadwell, personal communication, June 7, 2011). As a result, many who spend

immense amounts of time emerged in such rich gaming experiences are likely to critically question the ethical, mechanical, and personal impact this medium entails. Here, however, I am speaking specifically about elite gamers. Since there is no differentiation in the literature regarding degrees of video game participation, in what follows, I will outline several critical conversations central to more general gaming communities.

Among many gamers and game developers, of interest is the topic of representation of race, gender, and age, within gaming. Williams (2009) sampled 150 games, finding a vast over-representation of White adult males. There was a stark absence, among American games, of women, ethnic minorities, children, and older adults. While there are many games in which players can alter the race and gender of their avatars (though rarely their age), these attempts to provide for diversity within games typically fail to impact the gameplay in meaningful ways. Kato (2011a) clearly articulates why this should be of concern to game designers, critics, and gamers alike:

Video games' status as an interactive medium gives it the capacity to tell a unique truth to its audience. Part of that truth is strained when all the player sees are straight, white, male protagonists, just as it does with bad [artificial intelligence] or poor graphics. A lack of racial identity in characters also limits the palette of stories for the player by restricting the kinds of experiences protagonists of different backgrounds can bring to the table... (p. 11).

For those who take video games seriously, both as an art form and as a social tool, discussions of diversity are incredibly important to the legitimacy of the field.

Representations of women in video games have been a highly controversial topic in its own right. Recently, a great deal of debate has centered on Crystal Dynamic's revamping of the popular Lara Croft character. Previously showcasing voluptuous curves; overly-full, pouty lips; and long legs, the original Lara Croft has been considered



both an objectification of women and a satire thereof (Bissell, 2010). In 2011, however, Crystal Dynamic redesigned her narrative (via an origin story), as well as her physical presence: she now has a more athletic build, with more realistic proportions and more focus on the eyes than almost any other part of her body (Maria, 2011a). Since the change, fans of the franchise debate over which Lara is best, yet there is little conversation pertaining to the implications of such changes. Concerned gamers argue that gamers and designers need to think more critically about the implications of female representation, often while more many tend to ignore such issues (Bissell, 2010)

As indicated previously, looking at video games from a lens of cultural globalization is important to many gamers' playing experiences (Hawisher & Selfe, 2007; Pandey, Pandey, & Shreshtha, 2007; Smith & Deitsch, 2007). In fact, many gamers categorize games according to East (primarily Japanese games) and West (primarily American games), since distinctions between the two are quite pervasive (Cork, 2011a). Researchers are beginning to investigate the ways the culture producing a game becomes important in how players interact with and interpret it.

Cork (2011a), for instance, discussed the interesting phenomenon of rating video games from a sociological lens. He investigated the rating system used in Iran, a predominately Muslim country, noting that many norms that exist in games without question in the West can often be problematic in light of Islamic law and morality. Considering that there are over 10 million gamers in Iran and that most of the games they play are imported from Japan and America, determining a system for rating (and banning) games calls into question the assumptions societies take for granted as appropriate in gaming environments. As a result, an organization was developed in Iran to rate games on cultural, religious, and sociological criteria. The leader of this

organization, Minaei, explained that they conducted a "very long and scientific process to determine what the differences were between Iranian culture and American culture or Japanese culture" (Cork, 2011a, p. 17). Such an endeavor implies what Gee (2000a) has argued: consuming text is consuming culture and the ways of viewing the world unique to the Discourses they contain. I would add that in striving to articulate the similarities and differences among cultures that are largely assumed to be incompatible by many, the work Minaei describes is not just about coming to know more regarding video games, but also about people and cultures in such a way that may nurture more informed and relational understandings related to them.

One conversation that is of interest in the field is that of innovation. Throughout a survey of video game reviews, many reviewers noted the importance of a game's ability to build upon an established genre (e.g. shooters, role playing games, sports games) in ways that innovate and push the industry in new directions (Biessemer, 2011b; Helgeson, 2011; Juba, 2011a; Kato, 2011b; Reiner, 2011b). Gamers tend to be interested in a certain amount of novelty within genres that are familiar, allowing them to experience new adventures in a domain that they already have a level of expertise, comfort, and expectation. The challenge for game designers, however, is to innovate without alienating players (Maria, 2011b). If a game is too far beyond what experienced gamers expect or are comfortable with, they can come to feel cheated and aggravated, often becoming unwilling to play the particular game or future games by that company. As a result, there is a great deal of conversation within the elite gaming world about where the newest games fall on the continuum of innovation.

Another continuum often discussed in gaming communities pertains to the balance between a game's narrative and its gameplay. In a conversation with Chris

Novak, a game designer for Microsoft, Robison (2008) cites him as claiming that the primary goal of the games he designs is "to create moments to enable players to generate meaningful social narratives as a result of their gameplay experiences" (p. 361). Novak outlines two essential qualities of video games: the narrative, or storyline that provides the context for events, environment, and characters the players engage with, and the gameplay, or the means by which the player controls the avatar to achieve tasks, missions, or larger experiences and engage strategies and skills to play the game. Video games must consist of both in a way that sets them apart from many other games. Within video games, however, there is typically a story that prompts the game (Bissell, 2010), even if it is as simple as "The princess has been kidnapped," as any player of *Super Mario Brothers* (Nintendo Creative Department, 1985) can attest. The proper balance of the two elements is a much debated topic in the gaming world. For example, some worry that too many gameplay experiences can detract from a narrative (Kato, 2011b). The alternative extreme, however, would include an overly and previously developed story that leaves the player more passive than active. Since one of the attractions of video games is that active story construction via gameplay (Bissell, 2010; Gee, 2003/2007) the two must maintain a delicate balance. One without the other is likely to fall flat.

### **Need for this Study—Need for Complexity**

Across this first section of the literature review, I am struck by the complexities involving how gamers experience and value games. They approach the world around them and within games with particular strategies for constructing meaning in response to video game. They use game to produce and reproduce identities that are important to them. Many think critically about the messages and lessons presented in video games about various cultures and societies within them. Across these themes, I see a sense of

seriousness: to gamers, video games matter beyond the scope of mere entertainment and hobby. They constitute an important aspect of who they are and how they perceive and engage with the world.

Looking across the literature, however, many studies are based upon reflection upon gaming outside of gaming contexts (i.e. Gee, 2003/2007; Journet, 2007; Rowsell & Burke, 2009; Smith & Deitsch, 2007), while a few others looked very closely at occurrences within gaming only (i.e. Jenkins, 2004; Kress, 2003; Prensky, 2001b). None of the studies looked at one's experience as a gamer both within the moment and outside of the moment to determine what it means to play at elite levels. In addition, nowhere in the literature is there discussion about ways in which elite gamers differ from those who play casually or are novices. The present study aims to address these gaps in the literature by adding multiple layers of data (e.g. observation and interviews) to determine the ways in which one layer enriches or challenges another and through consideration of the practices and experiences of an elite gamer.

Furthermore, Bissell (2010) has pointed out a challenge relevant to this type of research. He argued at the beginning of his gaming autobiography that the problem with such writing is that gamers rarely read scholarly writing on games and academics rarely understand games well enough unless the content is glossed over to some extent. In the world of game studies, academics tend not to be interested in the "games," and gamers simply tend not to be interested in the "studies." One goal of the present study is to contribute work that bridges this gap between the two communities. To gamers, it hopes to provide an authentic lens and accessible language that is so often lacking in scholarly work on games. To the academy, it strives to expand the methodological and theoretical

standards of the field. If both these aims can be met, this study can bring together two communities that have a great deal to say to and with each other.

### **Making Video Games Fun**

This study investigates the nature of significant moments of play. I use this phrase to refer to those moments that players find most satisfying within the game. Significant moments might include those in which the player is most fully present in the game world, or simply when he or she is just having a great time. I have not been able to locate research on the nature of these moments. Indeed, game designers put a great deal of attention into questions of what makes a game satisfying, both immediately and longitudinally. Cadwell feels there are specific features of satisfying games. Cadwell is Vice President of Game Design for Riot Games and architect of *League of Legends* (2009), which *Forbes* magazine recently named the most played PC video game in the world (Gaudiosi, 2012). From his perspective the moment to moment game play should be rewarding, social bonds should be immediately gratifying, and stories should be emotionally engaging (Cadwell, personal communication, June 7, 2011). The logistics of how, in fact, a game is able to pull these aspects of good game play together is at the heart of heated debate in various gaming communities.

While there is discussion in the academic literature pertaining to flow and social learning theories in the act of playing video games (discussed below), outside of the academy, conversation about the ways in which games present opportunities for satisfying game play is quite lively. Many popular magazines are much more closely tied to the most current state of the art, since their publications do not require many months of peer review before publishing. More importantly, their interests lie in meeting the interests of gamers, both elite and casual alike, who engage with games on authentic

levels, which center primarily for the enjoyment and challenges they find in gaming. In the absence of peer review, these sources are kept accountable by a readership that is passionately, rather than merely professionally, engaged in games and expect the articles to be accurate, relevant, and immediately current. Sources that fall short of these standards receive scathing feedback in active online and print-based gaming communities and will not last long on the periodical shelves. In the interest of authenticity and relevance, I turned to popular sources, rather than scholarly ones, for a discussion on features of video games that best provide opportunities for significant moments of play.

I turned to *Game Informer*, a well-respected and widely read gaming magazine held in high esteem by professionals in the field of video game design and production, as well as elite gamers. While there are certainly as many opinions of a particular game as there are players of it, the fact over 8 million gamers, game designers, and industry leaders subscribe to this particular magazine (Lulofs, 2012, August 7) lends a measure of authority to their reviews. From these, I pulled 25 video game reviews, in which *Game Informer* staff members who have played a particular game that comes out on the market rate and describe their experiences with it. I chose only to pull reviews that scored a game at a seven or higher on the magazine's scale from one to ten (one meaning extremely poor and unplayable and ten meaning exemplary). This allowed me to focus my attention on strengths among successful games, rather than deal with all the many ways in which a game may be flawed.

I read each of the 25 reviews closely and conducted an informal content analysis, coding for key themes and phrases to determine what features the staff, which is most likely made up of elite and knowledgeable gamers, found critical to the enjoyment of a

game. From this analysis, eight themes emerged as important characteristics to avid and elite gamers.

### **Features of Good Games**

Good video games must be playable first and foremost (Helgeson, 2011; Maria, 2011b; Miller, 2011; Reiner, 2011b; Rychert, 2011). While this may seem obvious, video games maintain degrees of responsiveness in controls, fluidity of artificial intelligence (AI), and grounded physics, which if not adequate enough to play, will lead gamers to quit, simply because the game does not do what it is designed to do. With all of the many pieces of code that can potentially ruin a game's playability, elite gamers expect games to allow the player to do exactly what he or she intends to do, with no glitches hindering the experience.

Good video games are accessible (Cork, 2011b; Reiner, 2011b). While playability and accessibility both pertain to a player's ability to successfully play the game, playability refers to the mechanics within a game. Players expect every challenge to be attainable, as opposed to real life, in which there may be impossibilities involved. On the other hand accessibility refers to the ways in which a particular game trains the player to play it. For example, early levels should equip players to meet challenges at later levels of competition, scaffolding players as they learn to use characters' higher-level equipment or strategize in the face of novel opponents or challenges, for example. The game should teach the player how to best navigate through the entire game play at an intensity and rate that allows players of all levels to feel both challenged and capable.

Good video games provide the player with a sense of freedom (Bertz, 2011; Biessen, 2011b; Kato, 2011c; Turi, 2011). In such games, the players do not feel constrained to a limited number of options within game play, but rather they are free and

often rewarded, for creativity and adaptation. There are few, if any, penalties for exploring innovative ways to play the game. In his review of *Crysis 2* (Crytek, 2011), Bertz (2011) stressed the sense of freedom within this particular game: "Rather than force players into a series of predictable fights with predetermined weapons, [the design team] creates sandbox battle scenarios and allows each player to adopt his or her own preferred approach" (p. 84). In addition to providing experienced gamers "sandboxes" in which to explore the possibilities for creativity as they play, making room for innovation also makes a game re-playable, meaning that one can play it repeatedly for a variety of experiences. Many elite gamers value re-playability.

Good video games include a strong narrative and/or character development (Juba, 2011b; Kato, 2011c). Throughout the reviews, games' stories and characters were discussed frequently. This discussion was most obvious in reviews of role-playing games (RPGs), in which the player takes on the role of one character (or more) as that character travels through an adventure. According to the reviews, strong RPGs contain cohesive, plausible, and engaging plots and characters. Surprisingly, however, the importance of narrative and character development was valued in other kinds of video games. For example, after playing a game based on the professional golfing career of Tiger Woods, Kato (2011c) noted the depth of character development as Wood's character refines and gains skills and abilities in response to tournaments, past performance, and even to his caddy. It seems as though, regardless of the genre of video game, elite players want the story and/or the characters they play to develop in interesting ways.

Good games offer space for innovation (Biessen, 2011a; Juba, 2011b; Kato, 2011d; Reiner, 2011a). As well as other forms of media, new video games are often inspired by well-established genres of games. Gamers enjoy the fact that there are certain



aspects of games within the same category that they can count on to be present. In addition, there is an appreciation for innovation on the original inspiration. As discussed previously, novelty and innovation are points of debate in the gaming world, and my informal analysis of video games reviews reveals that this debate exists even on the level of specific games. In many instances, reviewers who took a stand on a particular side of the argument received a number of letters to the editor in the next issue of the magazine expressing some readers' strong disagreement.

Good video games are balanced (Bertz, 2011; Biessemer, 2011a; Gonzalez, 2011; Helgeson, 2011; Kato, 2011c). When a game is balanced, the player has the ability to earn the character's progression to higher abilities and levels reasonably. Aspects of the game are neither too powerful nor too weak compared to the player's avatar. An example of a game that would be unbalanced would be one in which a player might equip a character with a weapon that could defeat an opponent up to ten levels higher than him or her. Essentially, balanced games are fair—the player feels neither hopeless to defeat a challenge nor that the challenge is too easy to be taken seriously.

Lastly, good video games incorporate competitive level design (Bertz, 2011; Juba, 2011b; Kollar, 2011; Maria, 2011c). Level design refers to a game's progression of levels in ways that build upon past information and skills gained across previous experiences in the game, all the while allowing the game to become increasingly sophisticated and challenging. In doing so, players expect a certain level of intensity and challenge.

### **Need for This Study—Need for Authenticity**

The preceding eight themes outline what the staff of *Game Informer* found to be most helpful in describing characteristics of good games, a discussion notably absent in the academic literature. Gee (2009) comes closest to the themes in outlining features of

learning that are present in good video games. However, he has admitted that he has used video games to elaborate his original theories of learning, rather than generating theory upon them (Gee, 2003/2007). Taking a more theoretical approach has resulted in a degree of separation between games as they are experienced holistically and the ways they are played that pertain primarily to Gee's pre-existing theories of learning and discourse. While certainly there is some overlap in our categories (i.e. What I refer to as accessibility, he wrote about as information on demand and just in time.), he did not touch on the importance of playability, narrative and character development, or innovation, each of which were stressed numerous by various reviewers of games in a variety of genres. This is primarily due to Gee's focus on specific reconsiderations of video games in the context of literacy, learning, and identity.

I conducted the informal content analysis in order to gain access to a level of authentic discussion around video games, which is minimally evident in the academic literature. I conducted this study with the goal of bridging conversations among a range of stakeholders interested in gaming. To do so, this work must ring true for gamers who want video games to be taken seriously; it must also remain accessible for those who know very little about what it means to be a gamer or who may have never experienced significant moments of game play for themselves. This study investigated how one particular elite gamer experiences significant moments of play. Such research addresses a gap in the literature, a gap resulting from numerous studies which focus primarily on the design and production of games (e.g. Jenkins, 2004) or those which focus on the life histories of gamers (e.g. Hawisher & Selfe, 2007). This study addresses the transaction between the two. In what follows, I will look closely at the literature discussing the other

end of this transaction: experiences of players as they engage in flow in social gaming contexts.

### **For Love of the Game**

Video games are a widely enjoyed form of media. Gamers await releases of new games with the same fervor as movie-goers. They spend dozens of hours a week playing, and can punctuate key events in their lives by the games they played at the time (Bissell, 2010). In South Korea, highly successful gamers are revered as icons and are even televised on channels dedicated to showing high-level game play of these champions.

Outside of gaming spaces, there is often a general distrust towards video games and their players. One common misunderstanding held by many non-gamers is that video gamers are antisocial (Bauerlein, 2008). Another such misunderstanding is that, because of the very fact that video games are so enjoyable and gamers tend to play them across large amounts of time, they must be addictive (Greitemeyer, Traut-Mattausch, Osswald, 2012; Sherry, 2004; Lee & LaRose, 2007). Many researchers have challenged both of these claims by demonstrating the ways in which players' lives are enhanced by the affinity groups in which they participate via games, as well as by a heightened level of enjoyment (Beavis & O'Mara, 2010; Gee, 2009; Keller et al., 2007; Madriz, 2010; Selfe, Mareck, & Gardiner, 2007).

### **Gaming in Affinity Spaces**

As has been discussed previously, Gee (2007) has led the way in discussing the importance of social aspects within gaming. It is worth, however, reviewing the importance he placed on affinity groups within contexts of video games. Gee (2009) has gone to great lengths to differentiate between *affinity groups* and *communities of practice*. Communities of practice provides a lens for an individual's negotiation of social

identity, recognizing mutual engagement with others, jointly shared endeavors, and collective resources and languages of membership within a given community as important to that negotiation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Gee (2009), on the other hand, has found this concept problematic in that participation, membership, and boundaries are nebulous and difficult to articulate. The problem with such an approach is the assumption of a homogeneous community from the start, which there may or may not be. For this reason, Gee (2009) talked about locations, in which “we can ask of given spaces whether or not people interacting within them are communities and in what sense” (p. 89). It frees individuals for assumptions of bounded-ness that may prove inaccurate.

*Affinity spaces* refer to places in which individuals interact based upon a shared content (e.g. a specific video game, dancing, taxes, etc.); they are not restricted to physical spaces, but may refer to virtual environments as well (Gee, 2009). Experts and beginners may share the same spaces, with the experts sometimes playing the role of leaders within the space. There are many different ways in which to participate, gain status, access shared knowledge, share experiences, and contribute to the space.

In the case of video games, players exist within affinity spaces as they play together, sometimes physically together and sometimes virtually. I use the term *virtual* to describe spaces created and experienced in digitally constructed spaces; *real world* describes out-of-game experiences and spaces that allow individuals to interact with people and objects in the material world. While there are video games that are primarily made for a single player, gamers increasingly expect games to provide multi-player experiences, with some games, such as the Nintendo Wii and Xbox Kinect, marketed specifically for parties and shared playing. The most extreme example of this is of games within the genre of massively multi-player online games (MMO). In such PC games, a

player has the capacity to meet, build relationships, and collaborate with sometimes millions of other players online. Many of these relationships are formed among individuals who will never actually face each other in the real world, but rather will spend hundreds of hours together in virtual spaces, sometimes coming to know each other as if they were family.

Alternately, individuals may begin playing a game, even an MMO, with a friend from their real worlds (e.g. a neighbor, coworker, or classmate). Indeed, game designers are coming to see that “real life” friendships are becoming more important in gaming communities, as more virtual relationships are being leveraged among real world peers (Cadwell, personal communication, June 7, 2011). Indeed, in a survey study of college students’ video gaming practices, Jones (2003) found that 51% of respondents found gaming to strengthen out-of-game friendships, while the other 49% either believed they did not impact friendships or they negatively impacted them. For these players, affinity spaces provide opportunities to relate to each other in ways that extend friendships similarly to how one might in lived spaces: by building trust, sharing common triumphs or failures, or working towards a common goal together.

It is worth noting that, while I see a similar kind of relationship building at play here, I do not believe it is in fact the same as real world relationships, in which individuals meet face-to-face. Turkle (2011) has commented on the critical importance of whether we engage in relationships digitally or in the real world, warning that individuals are coming to use virtual spaces to hide from or tightly control more complicated and potentially painful intimate relationships in the real world. She talks about the phenomenon of individuals meeting for drinks, but then spending inordinate amounts of their time together texting, emailing, or messaging others. In these modes of

communication, individuals can control the messages being sent and their presentation of self in ways that they simply cannot in real-time conversation and relationship with others (Turkle, 2011). While I believe that there is certainly a need for individuals to share in sustained, real world relationships, as Turkle's research suggests, I also believe that digital spaces have the capacity to connect people in ways that would be otherwise unlikely. In gaming environments, digital spaces provide opportunities for collaboration, mentorship, and friendship in ways that are largely impossible in the real world. For example, two *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) players living on different continents are able to not only meet regularly to play the video game together, but share a common in-game enemy, build strategies as they progress through the game together, navigate new problems in gaming environments, and commiserate together how to balance gaming and college course work. It is easy to see how such a relationship might be fulfilling in particular ways.

In further defining affinity spaces, it is important to note that they have flexible and permeable boundaries (Gee, 2009). A particular affinity group often rubs elbows with other spaces, especially among elite gamers who play a variety of genres that are inspired by a wide array of literature, film, comic books, mythology, and historical texts. Among elite gamers, a great deal of this merging of boundaries exists within peripheral texts (Johnson, 2008), those which surround the actual games themselves. Elite gamers often contribute to peripheral text, including blogs, online journals, strategy guides, YouTube walkthroughs (filmed tutorials of expert level or unique challenges), fan fiction (fictional stories grounded in the settings and characters of popular games), discussion groups, expansion packs (codes for addition environments or challenges within a game), fan-art work, and cosplay (game-themed costume design) (Gee, 2009; Johnson, 2008).

Affinity spaces provide opportunities for democratic community building (Gee, 2003/2007). Players openly participate in the affinity spaces via playing, reading and producing peripheral texts, and playing the actual game. In addition, players contribute in powerful ways to the spaces as well. Johnson (2008) has pointed out that the levels and manner of civic participation gamers engage in, which regard to affinity spaces, is striking. This civic participation appears in two ways: one that impacts lived contexts of gamers within affinity spaces and one that affects the gaming industry.

On a real-world level, gamers are becoming increasingly connected to each other through strong online relationships (Jones, 2003). As describes above, one example is the global outreach of gamers in the “Play for Japan” initiative to raise money to support victims of the 2011 tsunami (Pereira, 2011). In addition, gamers with interests in social activism have created initiatives such as Project GO Kart, in which donors and volunteers work together to provide hospitals with portable gaming centers (Russell, 2011). Furthermore, schools and universities have begun to host charity-based gaming events, such as Easter Michigan University’s Gamers for Giving event in February of 2013, in which INTEL will sponsor a LAN tournament , which involves linking PCs together to engage in game play, and Xbox tournaments, from which all proceeds will go towards non-profit organizations (Wigal, 2012).

On the other hand, the ways in which gamers within affinity spaces and groups contribute to and participate with the community has had repercussions in the industry at large (Johnson, 2008). Game designers are positioned to be responsive to gamers in unprecedented ways. Gamers are highly present and visible through social media sites, such as Twitter and Facebook. Game companies maintain blogs, message boards, and online forums, which allow them to gauge the pulse of their fans relatively quickly and

effortlessly. In hearing feedback and responses to their games, they look forward to addressing praises, questions, complaints, and novel suggestions into their new creations (Bissell, 2010). While these initiatives are grounded in the desire for these companies to make a profit from their video games, the shift towards customization and responsiveness to a community of gamers is empowering, particularly as it becomes increasingly demanded and expected by consumers of games.

Affinity spaces, furthermore, build community from the inside out, with affinity groups regulating and maintaining their own spaces. In some cases, simply playing a game is inseparable from taking part in community development, often in quite civically minded ways. Johnson (2008) sites, as an example, an instance in the game *Ultima Online*. A group of players took advantage of a bug that allowed them to counterfeit the game's currency, leading to massive inflation within the game's economy. Before the programmers could fix the problem, players took it upon themselves to establish a bartering system to manage the glitch. This is an example of what Johnson refers to as reciprocity in which gamers and developers tangibly react to individual and group speech and action.

Rather than viewing gamers as antisocial, the above discussion argues that many video games provide affinity spaces rich with social engagement. Because these relationships can be rewarding, players often find a great deal of enjoyment. This simple connection has led some researchers to investigate the role of enjoyment in one's motivation to play video games, which can often require great commitment, persistence, and work. To explain why individuals would choose to take part in such a challenging task, researchers have often turned to flow theory to explain the motivating force at play.



## **Motivation to Play**

Flow represents the feeling of complete and energized focus in an activity, with a high level of enjoyment and fulfillment (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990a). In short, it refers to the state of being fully motivated to participate in an activity. As I outlined in chapter one, flow holds a great deal of potential to explain the ways in which elite gamers find video games so fulfilling. Flow theory provides a powerful framework to describe, understand, and analyze elite gamers' love of their games (Chen, 2007; Smith, 2007).

Sweetser and Wyeth (2005) used Csikzentmihalyi's flow theory as a model from which to evaluate the possible enjoyment in playing particular video games. Using such a framework, the researchers found the language and features of flow to aid in discussion of the quality of a video game. They argued that by further developing a framework within the industry would provide more uniformed discussion of game design and players' experiences within the gaming industry.

Sherry (2004) has found that video games offer players opportunities for both relaxation and arousal, both of which are bi-products of flow experiences. In the same way that an avid gardener is likely to feel both tired and satisfied after a long day of pruning and planting, an elite video gamer is prone to those same feelings after a successful raid in a dungeon or after finally beating a game. Such an experiences is similar to Montessori's description of a small child at play: "When children participate in a task that they are highly engaged and interested in, they expend a great deal of energy and concentration, yet emerge rested and satisfied, even at a very young age" (Salovey, 1998). Indeed, this is one way in which Csikzentmihalyi (1975, 1990a) differentiates between what one perceives to be work as opposed to play: when one enjoys a task to the extent that one finds rejuvenation, despite hard work.

Several researchers have candidly shared their experiences of gaming becoming something of a compulsion. In her autoethnographic case study as an avid gamer and English teacher, Journet (2007) noted in her research journal "Need to call this 'Obsession'. I spent four days doing nothing else but [play *Myst III*]. I have gone way past the need to do 'research'. Why is this compelling? What's going on?" (p. 97). Even having acknowledged that video games are a topic worthy of study and academic attention, she found herself struck by how fully immersed she became in the gaming world.

Journet is not alone. Bissell (2010) wrote in his book *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter* about the ways in which playing video games became almost therapeutic as he struggled with depression in his personal life, saying that the world of video games "was an extra life, and I was thankful to have had it (p. 5). He continued by explaining that he often tracks key moments in his life and in the world around him based on that games he played at that time; for example, he regretted missing President Obama's acceptance speech, due to a 7 hour session of playing *Fall Out 3*. Gee (2007), himself has admitted to his own compulsions to play, as well as that of his twin brother and son. In fact, Gee admitted that his first experience playing a video game lasted an unintended (and startling) eight hours.

### **Re-viewing Pathologies of Gaming**

There is growing concern for this obsessive desire to game that is reported among gamers and researchers alike. Some researchers have approached the presence of flow in video games through a more pathological lens. Chou and Ting (2003), for example, conducted a quantitative study centered on the ways in which the presence of flow may lead to gaming addictions among players. Their findings led them to conclude that repetition of a behavior combined with flow experiences from that behavior may work

together to produce cyber-game addictions. It is worth noting that video game addiction has not been recognized as a clinical condition or illness (Kato & Cork, 2011).

In a study of 538 college students, Lee and LaRose (2007) investigated the relationship between flow and Bandura's social cognitive perspective. In short, they wanted to determine the role of flow in how video game players regulate their gaming behaviors. Their findings suggested that players' heightened exposure to flow resulted in negative regulation of self-control. The more enjoyable the gaming experience, the less a player is capable of monitoring the amount of time dedicated to playing video games.

In addition, a two-year study of 3,000 children in grades 3-8, Gentile et al. (2011) determined that there was a correlation between greater "pathological" video game play, greater impulsivity, and lower social competence. The children who reported playing the most were found to be more likely to experience depression. Such research can add fuel to the fire in the arguments of parents, policy makers, and educators against video games in general. Many such voices decry video games, which they claim lead to violent behavior, illiteracy, lack of creativity, and antisocial behavior (Bauerlein, 2008). It is important to note that, when asked, many with such viewpoints will admit to never having attempted a video game or having watched their children or students play one (Gee, 2012).

Research such as Gentile's (2011), however, can be misleading. The conditions cited as linked to excessive video game play include impulsivity, social awkwardness, depression, social phobia, anxiety, and lower school performance. These are actually common experiences of many adolescents during challenging moments in development. It is worth noting that the age ranges of the study run from 8 to 14. Researchers, as well as parents and educators, may be overly quick to attribute the dramatic shifts in behavior,

affect, and mental being witnessed in adolescents to an already untrusted technology such as video games.

Furthermore, correlation does not ensure causality. One does not know from such a study which came first, the "pathological gaming" or the impulsivity and social awkwardness. Are gamers playing more if they are predisposition towards psychological illness or social unease? Are developmental factors in puberty impacting the ways in which they use games to hide from or cope with challenging feelings or experiences? Or are the games causing children to become mentally maladjusted? Such research cannot answer these questions, though many read them as taking a stand against video games, especially when using such a loaded phrase as "pathological video gaming" (Gentile, et al, 2011).

Such negative spins also exist within the popular news media. Members of the media have frequently taken a stand again against video games on the grounds that they lead to withdrawn, lazy, and maladjusted youth (Bauerlein, 2008). In the case of Jones's (2003) study of the gaming habits of college students, a member of the press negatively misrepresented his findings. Jones reported that 70% of college students at the time reported playing video games. Of that 70%, 48% of student gamers reported feeling that video games kept them from studying "some" or "a lot." Importantly, however, Jones points out that "college student gamers' reported hours studying per week match[ed] up closely with those reported by college students in general" (n.p.) Regardless of such findings, in her report on msn.com, Weaver (2003) stated that "almost half of gamers skip studying to play video games." Nowhere in the article does she add that almost half of non-gamers skip studying as well, falsely leaving gamers to appear unmotivated compared to their peers.

### **Need for This Study—Need for Multiple Dimensions**

To date, our society is struggling to find answers pertaining to what video games do for us and to us (Williams, 2007). In the absence of fuller understandings, those who play video games avidly are less likely to question the harms of video games, and those who do not play, fail to question the benefits. Social scripts portraying video gamers present them as one-dimensional and often as pathological. The present study intends to make the complexities and idiosyncrasies of one gamer transparent as I sought out the ways in which he participates in both individual flow and within social affinity spaces. While there is much to build upon in the literature pertaining to affinity spaces and flow theory, thus far the two camps have remained separate. By pulling the two together and layering one with the other, addition dimensions are likely to present a view of what it means to game.

In the following chapter, I present the methods I have employed in this dissertation study. I describe the study's epistemological underpinnings, design, data sources, participant selection, and analytical technics. Additionally, I describe the standards for quality for this study.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS OF INQUIRY

This dissertation study centered upon the story of one participant, an adult elite video game player, who finds enjoyment and community in his gaming experiences. In general, I was interested in the ways in which this case study challenges many popular cultural images of violent, antisocial, and illiterate video gamers held by many in American culture (e.g. Bauerlein, 2008; Gentile, 2011), and instead present the experiences of an elite gamer, and what his experiences might teach about the nature of gaming, flow, and situated learning. This study presents implications for researchers, educators, and the general public, especially those parties most interested in literacy and learning writ large.

Previously, I outlined the theoretical framework that guides this study, namely symbiotic flow theory (see Chapter 1). I continued by reviewing the current literature that exists surrounding understandings of motivation, literacy, and video games in such a way as to identify the ways in which this study fills several gaps within this corpus (see Chapter 2). This chapter builds upon the groundwork of the proceeding literature review by outlining the epistemological framework that informs this study, its methodological positioning, and the specific procedures I took in conducting and analyzing this case study. Throughout, I will outline the proposed methods, namely case study (Stake, 2000) and mediated discourse analysis (Jones & Norris, 2004), supported by my epistemological orientation towards symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969/1986) and advocacy/participatory (Creswell, 2009) perspectives. I will additionally argue for why these methods and theories work cohesively to establish a compelling method inquiry to approach the questions guiding this study.

## **Research Questions**

The following primary research questions guide this investigation: What does it mean to be an elite gamer, to one life-long player of video games? In addition, the following sub-questions serve to support understandings that present complex perspectives: a) What aspects of elite gaming are important and meaningful to one particular gamer? b) What moments of play does this gamer identify as significant? c) What does sustained play look like for one particular elite gamer? I will outline my understandings of what counts as knowledge throughout this study in order to begin justifying the methods employed throughout.

## **Epistemological Orientations**

Researchers are “bound within a net of epistemological and ontological premises which—regardless of ultimate truth or falsity—becomes partially self-validating” (Bateson, 1972, p. 314). As researchers embark on various inquiries, it becomes critical to locate themselves within a nexus of understandings to determine what counts as knowledge, how the researcher will identify that knowledge throughout the study, and how that knowledge will be represented to an external audience. The more thoroughly researchers consider their epistemological orientation, the more intentional their steps become in engaging with contexts, participants, problems, and questions as they exist within lived worlds (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

### **Advocacy/Participatory Orientation**

Creswell (2009) has described an advocacy/participatory orientation as building upon constructivist paradigms in order to add a critical lens with which to advocate for marginalized voices. Constructivists hold that individuals co-create knowledge as they transact with their worlds (Creswell, 2009). In this framework, knowledge is “contingent

upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Advocacy/participatory orientations, however, point intentionally to the experiences of the world by otherwise silenced voices, with the intent to enact change in larger representations of those voices or in sociopolitical changes in the world (Creswell, 2009). From this stand point, the role of the researcher has been described as “passionate participant” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 195), for whom the study holds both professional and personal interest and consequences. The primary concern is the praxis, or reflection in the midst of action, between individuals and the world they inhabit (Freire, 1972/2000).

Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) pointed to the following as features of advocacy/participatory orientations: (a) participatory action is recursive and focused toward a goal of enacted change; (b) the researcher, rather than playing the role of an emancipator, strives to empower individuals to participate in their own freedom (Freire, 1972/2000); (c) the researcher strives to open an issue for political debate in a larger context; and (d) methods are collaborative with participants, as opposed to research that is conducted upon others. These features tease out interesting nuances to the term participatory. Such research positions the researcher as a part of a movement to empower a particular community, even if not a part of the community in which participants belong. In this way, advocacy/participatory researchers come to see themselves as collaborators with participants, as well as participants’ humble guests within a group of individuals who are more privileged with understandings of shared norms, beliefs, values, and knowledge sets. Put another way, participants themselves are invited to take on roles of co-researcher, to various extents, in that the researcher turns to them for confirmation



throughout the course of a given study. In doing so, the participant and researcher together cooperate to construct understandings of an experience together.

As stated previously, one of the driving forces behind this study is to invite an increasingly present population within the 21st century classroom, that is elite video gamers, into dialogue with academics and educators. Typical media representations of gamers tend to paint them as troubled, alliterate sociopaths (e.g. Bauerlein, 2008). The varieties of abilities, resources, and identities many gamers bring with them to educational contexts are typically not only minimized, but often vilified by teachers, administrators, and parents (Gee, 2003/2007; Gee 2009; Selfe, Mareck, & Gardiner, 2007), stripping them of voice. As a result, research from an advocacy/participatory orientation, such as this one, is much needed. In inviting one particular gamer into an academic dialogue, we inquired together the ways in which the gamer makes meaning through his transactions in both virtual and embodied worlds. I am, in some ways, a participant in this study in that, while I am not the primary source of data, I have a vested interest in the participant and the purpose of this study to effect debate and change for a larger audience. In addition, I have turned regularly to the participant as I made methodological decisions, as I collected and analyzed data, and as I have construct public documents based on this study.

### **Symbolic Interactionist Orientation**

The second epistemological orientation guiding this study is that of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism hails from pragmatism. Largely established by John Dewey and William James in the early 20th century, pragmatism places the articulation of meaning on enacted outcomes. For them, meanings of ideas and values are linked to outcomes and practices in which they are lived. For example, much of Dewey's

work centers on understandings of American education from the vantage point of what it does, rather than what schools intend or theorize, as is relevant to beliefs about the purposes and function of education (Dewey, 1915). In coming to understand the meaning-to-practice connection, "meaning has reference...to the ordinary situations and conditions in which actions occur" (Thayer, 1968, p. 173). As a result, many pragmatists branched off into what is now called symbolic interactionism, coming to view meaning of one's experience as an investigation into one's culture (Thayer, 1968).

George Herbert Mead is considered the founder of symbolic interactionism, although it is his student, Herbert Blumer, who carried Mead's theories into the realm of the social sciences. Blumer (1969) outlined the three basic tenants of symbolic interactionism as follows: a) Humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things; b) The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others and the society; c) These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters. In light of this epistemic positioning, I have constructed this study to consider an elite gamer's meaning-making processes with games both from the vantage points of retrospective reflection and observation as he is immersed in events and communities in real-time gaming. Therefore, I witnessed and analyzed his construction of meaning in action and interactions with others.

For Mead (1934), knowledge was neither based on a priori truths nor on relativist interpretations of the world, but on the meanings ascribed by significant symbols (i.e. text, speech, action, image, and other symbolic tools) within a community or what Gee might more specifically refer to as a semiotic domain (Gee, 2003/2007). Mead's (1934) most famous illustration of symbolic interactionism is an example of a wink: the act of

blinking one eye and winking are physiologically and objectively similar, yet the meaning of each varies dramatically. A wink may carry meanings of conspiracy among accomplices, flirtation among lovers, and encouragement among colleagues, and yet the meaning is rarely confused with that of a simply blinking of an eye. Therefore, it is not the act itself that carries meaning, but the interpretation thereof (Mead, 1934).

Another more contemporary example of the critical role of context in the construction of meaning is that of the term *pwned*. To someone outside of a gaming community, this term has little meaning. Within gaming communities, players often taunt each other when competing against each other. When one player beats the other, he is likely to say that he “owned” the other player. Because the speed at which players must type is incredibly fast in real-time strategy games, *owned* was often mistyped as *pwned*. Over time, using the mistyped version is an indication that one is a deeply entrenched member of gaming communities, granting the player a bit of status and legitimacy among peers. In this example, the utterance or typing of a specific term is part of gaming culture, giving clues to the playful, mutable nature of language use in gaming cultures and drawing the line between insider and outsider to this community. In other words, its meaning is *only* derived from the social significance within specific communities of discourse.

Symbolic interactionism builds sensitively upon the context on a specific experience. Over the decades since Mead and Blumer began publishing on the topic of symbolic interactionism, more and more researchers have begun to integrate key concepts into sociological thought, increasingly viewing culture as critical to the construction of meaning of one’s experiences (Fine, 1993). Experiences themselves become clues of culture, of the ways in which a particular people construct and assign meaning to the

world around them, rather than dislocated observations. In other words, one's interpretation of a specific idea carries the finger prints of how he or she constructs meaning more generally. In the case of the present study, this epistemology has positioned me to better understand the elite gamer's experiences as importantly informed by the affinity groups to which he belongs and which co-construct their own micro-cultures, rather than merely one man's entirely idiosyncratic experience. As indicated by the research questions themselves, this study delves into the participant's engagement with both activity and identity. Symbolic interactionism provides a lens through which to better honor the relationship between the two as it positions me to look not at one or the other, but of the intersection of action and meaning.

### **The Intersection of Orientations**

As Mead (1934) pointed out, human action is very much informed by socially inscribed meanings. Put another way, one does not construct meaning in isolation, but in response to formative experiences and understandings that lead them particular interpretations of them. Some researchers note that in ascribing meaning to the world around them, individuals simultaneously construct understandings of themselves (Fine, 1993). Rather than the relationship between individual and society existing as a one-way-street, the two transact simultaneously. Certainly, because sociocultural norms exist in ways that inform our future choices, identities, and experiences, Mead viewed social interaction as laden with constrictions of power (Athens, 2009) as individuals choose to comply to normative expectations or to subvert them. Because of this critical lens, social interactionism comments importantly on advocacy/participatory orientations, since those who are often most in need of advocacy do not conform to normative constructions of

meaning. In some cases, resistance is by choice; in others, it is due to variances in culture capital that one brings to meaning construction (Bourdieu, 1984).

Additionally, the two orientations share an appreciation of emic accounts of knowledge, privileging an insider's view of an experience. Because symbolic tools reveal socially specific meanings, the symbolic interactionist must practice discipline to ensure that the participants' meanings are those that are recorded and reported, rather than only his or hers (Blumer, 1969). This harmonizes with advocacy/participatory views that honor voices of participants in relatively radical and certainly intentional ways, going so far as to include participants in decision-making processes and frequent member checks. From both lenses, the researcher values and honors the meanings, goals, and experiences that come from a participants' position within his or her lived context.

### **Qualitative Design of the Study**

This qualitative study presents a case study of one elite gamer. Such a choice of research design is appropriate in light of the epistemological framework with which I have approached this research. I have employed case study methods (Stake, 2000) in organizing the overarching structure of inquiry and presentation of data. I draw from mediated discourse analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) in an attempt to locate the meanings at the intersection of action/event and culture/setting within the larger case study. Both of these research designs, taken together or separately, draw from qualitative research tradition, in that they strive to explore and understand the meanings that the participant ascribes to a specific set of experiences, identities, and texts (Creswell, 2009). In the following section, I will introduce each of the two research designs separately and conclude by demonstrating how one design works to expand and enhance the other to produce a compelling qualitative study.

## Case Study

Merriam defined a case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit” (1988, p. 16). A researcher endeavoring to work within the realm of case study methodologies selects a singular case, or a “bounded system” (Stake, 2000), based on purposeful sampling processes (Patton, 1990) that will provide new insights into a larger context. In short, “It is one among others” (Stake, 2000).

While more positivistic research methodologies often posit that only one participant within a study may be problematic in terms of generalizability, case study researchers argue that generalizability is not the end of the story (Barone, 2004; Newkirk, 1992). Rather, the goal of case study research is to foster a reconsideration of a particular population, experience, or phenomenon in light of the meanings, values, and beliefs attached to one case’s perspective (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 2000). Stake (2000) further articulates the purposes of case study research by categorizing studies into three groupings: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. Intrinsic case studies are those in which a particular case is of interest to a researcher in and of itself. Instrumental case studies attempt to apply gleanings of a particular case to a larger issue, problem, or experience. Collective case studies may be either intrinsic or instrumental, yet they always include multiple cases for consideration. While this particular case study holds immense relevance to 21<sup>st</sup> century video gamers (many of them students) and many in the field of research and education, it is largely intrinsic as I investigate the experiences and understandings of a participant who I care for and a topic that has influenced many of the students I have taught and acquaintances I have known.

## Mediated Discourse Analysis

Mediated discourse analysis (MDA) differs from traditional case study research in many ways, but primarily in the intimate relationship between action and meaning upon which such researchers focus. Grounded on Vygotsky's (1987) perspectives on discourse and Wertsch's (2005) understandings of mediational tools, MDA focuses on *mediated action* as the primary unit of study (Scollon, 2001). *Mediated action* refers to actions an individual takes as it is materially and socially grounded to inseparable extents (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Because mediated action is seen as situated so intimately in social practices and mediational means, or cultural tools (Wertsch, 2005), mediated discourse analysts emphasize the historically idiosyncratic embeddedness of real-time events as they are lived. For this reason, MDA deals with what is called a *nexus of practice* (Scollon & Scollon, 2004), which refers to a web of trajectories pertaining to people, places, discourses, ideas, and objects surrounding an action.

Because of the precision and specificity of analysis of actions, *practice* refers to a more limited gaze than in other research methods (Jones & Norris, 2005). For example, within almost any other qualitative research design, one might safely refer to a participant's *video gaming practices*, because the approach to investigating the phenomena of gaming moves from general to specific. Mediated discourse analysis, however, begins quite specifically and moves to the general. It looks specifically at the positionality of an occurrence (i.e. action, utterance, gesture, etc.) within time and space, with the understanding that time and space, in and of themselves, afford certain options and limit others (Scollon, 2001). Therefore, to consider video game play as a practice, the scope of what the researcher is to attend to can be overwhelming: is one noting how the gamer initiates a presence within guilds, equips characters, leads battles, gains

experience, or simply logs on? Each of these activities require multiple practices within them. As a result, the mediated discourse analyst refers to larger constructs, such as gaming, as a nexus of practice (Jones & Norris, 2005), which is made up of multiple, recursive, and ever changing practices, each of which become potential targets of discreet observation and analysis.

Several researchers who use MDA methods argue that mediated action both produce and reproduce social identities and social practice (Jones & Norris, 2005; Scollon, 2001). This is an important reason that I use such methods; by pairing traditional case study methods with MDA, I am able to compare the participant's words in interviews with his actions in gaming situations in which he is in a state of flow. Such comparison is not possible with interviews and general observations alone. By considering his observed actions as they a) are positioned in the participant's historical life trajectory, b) use meaning-rich mediational tools (e.g. technologies, avatars, strategies, discourses, etc.) within video games, and c) form and revise particular identities for him, a more complex picture is visible through the data.

The aim of this particular design is to create and conduct research that honors the unique and idiosyncratic nature of the participant's gaming experiences. By pulling from case study and MDA methods, which alternately expand and contract the perspectives of the researcher and participant, I have been equipped with a project unique to the field of education and video game studies, with robust and complex findings.

### **Selection of Participant**

For the purpose of this study, I selected one elite video gamer, John, due to the vast knowledge that he brings to this study. While gaming is an extensive and important domain in John's life, there are additional facets to his interests and lifestyle. He is an



engaged father, spending many afternoons and weekends toting his (now three-year-old) daughter to story times at libraries, gymnastics play groups, and to the park. He regularly volunteers as a softball coach for the recreational teams at a nearby county park. He is politically active and vocal in his community, reading widely about candidates, issues up for consideration, and bills passed by state and national legislators. He follows baseball, football, and NASCAR, and is an enthusiastic spectator of Olympic and World Cup competitions. Across his life, he has participated in a range of athletics, including basketball, football, soccer, diving, skateboarding, and Brazilian ju-jitsu. Clearly, John has diverse interests and is active in multiple far-reaching communities in his daily life. However, despite his varied interests, gaming, particularly at highly competitive levels, has been a critical aspect of John's life.

John has participated in video game play since the infancy of console and personal computer video games, beginning in 1980, when he was 5 years old. He has engaged in a vast variety of games ranging from arcade games of the 1980s and 1990s, to on-line MMO RPGs, to games on virtually every console made in America. (See Chapter 4 for timelines of John's gaming life history.) He has participated in alpha and beta testing for Blizzard (the company that created the internationally bestselling game, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004)), in addition to attending limited-access video game and technology conferences such as Blizz Con and E3. He has not only played games extensively, but he has played a role in game development. John has a history, a longitudinal perspective of what it means to be a video gamer. John brings to this study an intensity that few other participants could.

Returning to a consideration of the existing literature, John is, in many ways, an exceptional case, regardless of how common his experiences seem at first glance to many

adolescents I have taught in my classroom. He is a divergent case in light of the fact that, in the research literature, the majority of voices honored in discussions of video gaming are those of highly academic participants (Williams, 2007). While John is currently highly engaged in a variety of literacies, works in a competitive IT field, and reads both widely and deeply in a range of genres, as a teenager, he found gaming literacies more engaging and relevant than those within school, as evidenced by his choice to forego attending high school many days in favor of playing video games, building platforms on which to play, and experimenting with then budding global communication technologies. Regardless of such a decision, he has harnessed the skills he gleaned working with computers for gaming purposes to establish a successful career. Such a background is unique to the literature, yet, as I have described in the introduction, is all too common for many of the digitally-minded students in American classrooms.

### **Justification of Participant**

The participant, John, is my husband. I have put a great deal of reflection into this selection, considering Patton's (1990) work on purposeful sampling, which has led me to think carefully about the affordances and limitations of selecting John for this research. There may be those who might find my selection of my spouse a limitation of the proposed study. Qualitative research, however, is filled with several examples of well-respected theorists and methodologists who have studied family members. Jean Piaget studied his three children from their infancies, resulting in revolutionary understandings of pivotal stages in child development (Vidal, 1994). James Paul Gee (2007) studied his son's literacy and gaming engagements, observations of which have significantly impacted the field of discourse analysis, literacy, and video game studies. Deb Roy (2009) of MIT conducted a study of her son's language acquisition which resulted in

interesting new findings relating to language modeling in early child development. Each of these researchers cited above include cases around the researchers' children. To my knowledge there are no studies within the field of literacy in which the researcher studied the understandings of a spouse. When consulting several university librarians, they confirmed this to be their findings as well.

In addition to a precedence of researchers involving their families in their studies, the methodological literature convinces me that studying my spouse has specific benefits. In arguing for building "long term" and "intimate" relationships with participants, Chambers (2000) points out that doing so "provides rich, contextual information that can increase the depth of our knowledge of particular subjects" (p. 862). Janesick (2000) adds that building trust and rapport establishes greater honesty, as well as the researcher's ability to view nuances and meaning from the participant's point of view. Such relationships are the hallmark of qualitative design. In many ways, this approach resists traditional, post-colonial methods of inquiry that position the researcher in positions of authority over an objectified other (Madriz, 2000).

Since my participant and I already have an established relationship coming into the study, issues of trust, honesty, empathy, and collaboration were already organically developed. Indeed, across the data collection and analysis, John and I had frequent and transparent conversations about our perspectives on the progress we made, challenges that arose, and possibilities along the way. At several points, John felt the need to redirect me as he felt I did not clearly understand key ideas he was sharing with me about his perceptions of his gaming practices. These conversations were invaluable, as they allowed me to responsively address his questions, hopes, and ideas, so much of which

pushed me to think and articulate more clearly the purposes, intentions, and understandings as they shifted over time.

### **Role of the Researcher**

When considering the potentials of one's actions in time and space, the mediated discourse analyst is quick to point out that one's position provides both opportunities and limitations (Scollon, 2001). At times, the opportunities and limitations of my role as a research merged at critical points, positioning me oxymoronically as both protector and invader simultaneous. I felt very protective of John as I knew I could offer him no anonymity, but rather he would be known to my reader quite directly. I found myself wanting to protect him by highlighting one quote over another in an attempt to go with the more flattering turn of phrase. Alternately, as a research, I could not escape moments of invasion, in which John's time with me was always interrupted by questions pertaining to this study or family holidays became fodder for an anecdote in this document. Similarly, in representing John in this work, there have moments that gave me pause as I negotiated whether a particular revelation might be more revelatory than John might appreciate, useful though it might be to a reader. In what follows, I will talk more specifically to the affordances and limitations of my role as the researcher.

In several ways, my positionality offers distinct affordances. From the start, I was best positioned to know at the threshold of the study those questions, conversations, and experiences that hold greater access to John's understandings that guide this study. As with the work of Piaget, Gee, and Roy, my positionality with the participant allows me to observe more closely the daily habits and dispositions John brings to his gaming practices. Since he is someone I care for deeply, I can conduct this study with a deeper sense of advocacy, sensitivity, and authenticity in regard to data collection and

representation (Anderson, 2006). Finally, my relationship with John fosters greater depth of knowledge (Chambers, 2000) and honesty (Janesick, 2000), which enrich any qualitative case study. In many ways, my positionality adds validity and strength to this study.

Other affordances, however, begin from my desire to invite open dialogue not only with John as a gamer, but also with the generations of gamers that are and will increasingly fill the 21st century classroom. Wanting to represent John as accurately as possible, we have worked to include steps that verify a high degree of quality in representation of his views. In one conversation, John indicated that he wants this study to be one that would likely earn the respect of other gamers, that could be respected by friends and associates in the gaming world who, he predicts, would be excited to see similar realities finally be addressed in authentic and thoughtful ways. My professional purposes behind this project are similar: to train a focused eye on the implications of the experiences of John's gaming for gamers who are finding, increasingly, that school is not the place in which 21st century skills are being learned. Rather, it is in gaming worlds, as well as parallel communities and domains. John and I together share similar personal goals in creating a study that matters, whether to other serious gamers or in the lives of those who teach our newest gamers. Such a shared commitment is likely to ensure greater authenticity, validity, and trustworthiness.

While I am certainly an insider (Creswell, 2009) in John's life, in that I am very much a part of his daily life, practices, and community, there are several ways in which I am an outsider in his gaming practices. John has been my first contact with serious gaming, and for more than a decade, he has introduced me to several games. For several reasons, I have not had the time to play as seriously as I would like, playing most games

very casually, sporadically, and almost never to completion. I see myself as a novice within the gaming community. Bateson (1994) has pointed out that the research process entails “meeting difference; allowing difference to challenge assumptions, values, and beliefs; improvising and adapting to difference; and thereby learning as the narrative anthropologist” (p. 9). As I teetered on the brink of insider and outsider, the data often led me to confront difference (whether expected or unexpected), which then provided opportunities for me to reconsider my previously held understandings of John’s practices.

Alternately, there have been possibilities that have been limited because of my positionality within the proposed study. As the researcher, living in my household, I often maintained a certain level of mindfulness towards daily experiences that might add to our study. John and I often felt always “on duty” within the seclusion of our own home, where almost all data was generated. I could understand St. Pierre’s (1997) description of data that were “uncodable, excessive, out-of-control, out-of-category” (p. 179), as the study often reached beyond the boundaries of a scholarly project and into just another part of how our household functioned. Luckily, however, because of our mutual excitement about this study, we tended to enjoy the extension of these conversations, many of which were interrupted so that I could retrieve my recording device.

During the data collection, there were occasions during which my knowledge surrounding John limited my ability to fully understand events from his adolescence, during which he was understandably quite unlike himself, as I know him. As a result of the quite intensive member checking implemented across this study, however, John was quick to point out when I had misinterpreted or misrepresented him due to these moments of dissonance between John as I have known him and John as he was in the past and in different contexts.

There were several instances in which I found myself troubled by tensions between pieces of data and what I have known of John across our relationship. When, for example, an unflattering piece of data portrayed John in a light that initially seemed selfish and dismissive of others, I grappled with how to align that datum with my perspective of John as a generous individual. Typically in such an instance I found that I was often coming to the issue with too reductive a lens, as if my husband could only either be generous or selfish. Once I could work through the complexities, acknowledging the false dichotomies for what they were, I eventually came to more nuanced understandings, not just of John, but of his experiences and understandings of gaming as well. In such instances, such initial challenges gave way to deeper understandings across the study.

In addition, across the study, I grappled with intellectual honesty in a way that I might not have done, had my participant been anyone else. In revealing the experiences of my husband's gaming in our household, there have been several moments in which details of our home life, namely my long-term frustration with the amount of time John spends playing video games, have become a matter of academic data. Such vulnerability was quite startling to me as a new researcher.

A final limitation pertains to the role of primary author of a research text centered upon a loved other. In coding, analyzing, and representing data, I found it very challenging to walk the line at times between honest representations and protecting my participant from possibly overly-harsh scrutiny of others in the field. I was intensely self-conscious of how others might judge John within academic communities and how his peers might in turn judge me in gaming communities. The discipline of looking at the

data with an eye towards the questions, defensible interpretations, and honest representation became critical to navigating this challenge (St.Pierre, 1997).

Most of these limitations, however, have the potential to be resolved by one final affordance: that of mutual respect. Because of the deep-seated respect John and I have for each other, we have very open lines of communication. We have been able to openly talk about concerns, misunderstandings, and confusion; these conversations at times even became a part of the data, as will be seen. Essentially, I agree with Eisner (1997), who has explained that “human feeling does not pollute understanding. In fact, understanding others and the situations they face may well require it” (p. 8). As I articulate below, I have strived to blend the understandings presented throughout the data and through my personal knowledge of John with methods of analysis that present rigorous scholarship to the field of education.

### **Procedures**

I collected data for this study beginning in the fall of 2011 through the spring of 2012. It was conducted primarily in our home, with the exception of conversations that spontaneously arose as we drove in the car, talked over dinner at a restaurant, walking through a book store. As will be seen in more specific descriptions of the data collection phase below, the majority of the data were collected via a digital voice recorder, a program allowing John to record his game play of PC video games on his desktop, and my research journal (including both a paper journal and digital recordings). Since John largely played video games during the evening hours, much of the observational data were recorded between 10:00pm-3:00am. Playing at such times allowed him to spend time with me and our daughter during our waking hours and to collaborate with fellow gamers in different time zones around the globe. We conducted interviews primarily in



the evening hours as well. Notes were collected at irregular times, since they often were written in my reflection upon an interview, observation, or informal conversation with John. These sometimes occurred in my car driving to or from work (via the digital voice recorder) and sometimes in deliberate moments of response immediately following interviews or even as I transcribed interviews or video footage. All data, transcripts, memos, and code books were stored on our home pass-word and fire-wall protected server via Atlas.ti, a qualitative data management system.

### **Data Collection**

This study uses a variety of data sources. Table 2 outlines the relationship between the questions guiding this study and the data sources used. Appendix A presents a table summarizing the data sources I employed throughout this study, as well as their individual purposes and the proposed methods of analysis.

#### **Semi-structured Interviews**

A semi-structured interview is one that is flexibly designed, so as to allow for the researcher to ask participants pre-determined questions, as well as those which spontaneously arise during the interview in response to the line of conversation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Such interviews serve several purposes: they allow me to pre-design questions in response to pre-existing data that I wished to follow up on, as well as to have the flexibility to pursue interesting leads in unexpected directions. In talking through the conceptualization and design of this study and in negotiating shared goals for this study, John is already very familiar with the themes and interests that are likely to be a part of these interviews. With this in mind, I conducted five semi-structured interviews which remained loosely structured, meaning they resembled guided conversations rather than more question-centered interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Table 2: *Relationship between Questions and Data Sources*

Question	Data Source
What does it mean to be an elite gamer, to one life-long player?	Semi-structured interviews Theme co-analysis Researcher Journal
What aspects of elite gaming are important and meaningful to one particular gamer?	Semi-structured interviews Theme co-analysis Observations Debriefing interview
What moments of play does this gamer identify as significant?	Semi-structured interviews Observations Debriefing interview
What does sustained play look like for this particular elite gamer?	Observations Debriefing interview

These interviews provided me with an opportunity to iteratively explore John's understandings, experiences, and views towards gaming. I have included a list of the questions used across interviews in Appendix B, each of which was informed by the coding of my data between interviews.

The interviews were designed to encourage reflection on John's understandings (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) of what it means to be a gamer that experiences flow, community, text, and a host of other features in unique ways. I conducted a preliminary interview that served as a springboard for future discussions, in that it allowed John and me to hold a conversation that pulls together several themes that were critical in our discussions of the larger purpose and questions of video games and symbiotic flow. After coding this interview, I then determined critical themes that might be fruitful to explore in three preceding interviews. As a result of this processes, each interview informed the next, leading up to a conclusive interview at the end of the data collection in which I returned to John several themes that I saw emerging in existing data, asked him to comment on them, and asked several questions that served to pull together large ideas from across

interviews. Clearly, analysis of the data occurred throughout the collection phase, allowing me to create questions and follow themes responsively. Several of the interviews revealed memories and anecdotes from John's gaming history and were extracted as much as possible to be used as semi-fictionalized think scenes (Fitzgerald & Noblit, 1999), which revealed important implications for what games mean to John. These are presented in Chapter 4.

Most of the interviews lasted approximately two hours of uninterrupted time within our home, with one having to be continued at another time, due to the length of the conversation. I audio-recorded the interviews and transcribed them in the following week or two with ample time for preliminary coding before the next interview occurs, so as to explore possible directions of themes within the context of data collections.

### **Observations**

In order to most fully look at the ways in which John engages with video games, specifically during significant game play, I needed to look very closely at his gaming experiences. We had originally planned to conduct both virtual and embodied observations, with the virtual observations recording John's avatar and voice within the video game interacting with other and the embodied observations recording John at his desk playing the game. Once we began the first observation, however, John was quite distracted and uncomfortable with being video recorded sitting at his desk. Following this, he and I talked about the utility and benefits of this recording, finally agreeing that we leave out this segment of data. This allowed John more flexibility to record the digital game play, so that he need not notify me, wait for me to set up a cameral, and then begin to record. Rather, he could, at the press of a few keys, begin recording for himself without me when he found himself in flow-producing gaming moments. These recordings

followed the experiences and uses of John's in-game avatar, so that, while I did not directly observe John's body in the midst of games, I witnessed how he used his disembodied avatar to speak, act, and engage with others for him in this virtual space.

To capture moments of significant play and to consider the possibilities of symbiotic flow as a feature of such experiences, I conducted four observations. These were unplanned and fully dependent on John's choice of time and selection of game (all games observed in this data set were online PC games). John selected 30-minute segments during which he was in a state of flow, when he was fully enjoying the game play, was pushed to the edge of his ability, and was performing remarkably well. During these observations, John was able to record and save a certain amount of game play. Within the next day, he shared the file with me. Most of the recordings ran 30 minutes in length, capturing the visual display of the game, as well as John and his teammates' voices on chat programs and audio from the game play (e.g. sound track, voice actors speaking for characters, environmental sound effects). Soon after receiving these files, I viewed them, took memos, and constructed questions in response to them for the next semi-structured interview.

With regard to how such complex and multi-modal data might be transcribed and coded, I used the work of Nevile (2005) as a model. Nevile's work with analytical methods within MDA has presented a rigorous analysis of moment-by-moment actions as they are nested within increasingly larger events and finally within a nexus of practice. He begins by identifying discreet actions, utterances, and gestures.

To situate the data within physical actions and larger events, Nevile presents his same data similarly to Table 3. As the table moves from left to right, the data move from

Table 3: *Expanded Example from Neville, (2005)*

2PF	Flaps ten thanks::;	Extending wing flaps	Preparing the plane for landing
4PNF	-kay: you've got flaps ten		
6PF	Gear down thanks	Lowering landing gear	
8PNF	An:nd down four greens		
10PF	Flaps twentyfi:ve ERP gp-around "thanks"	Extending wing flaps to "25"	
12PNF	Flaps(.) twentyfive,		
14PF	Check thanks,	Calling for landing checklist	

specific utterances to actions to event, all within the nexus of practice that we might call *landing a plane*. While Neville's model provides a framework for observing footage or real-time events as they exist in the world, I have adapted this approach to analyzing the multi-modal footage of video game play, which is filled with both printed text, spoken word (of avatars and players), gesture, music, virtual environments and climates (e.g. a wintry night as opposed to a spring afternoon), maps, and avatar statistics. I only conducted this type of analysis with small segments of game play data due to the immense time investment required. These segments were selected following the Observation Debriefs (see below) and in light of the constructs and practices revealed within them. Such an approach intends to look at what Gee (2007) refers to as projective identity within the context of Csikzentmihalyi's flow (1975). Themes or divergent observations from these recordings framed future questions for subsequent interviews. Again, one can see that data analysis threads throughout the data collection for this study (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006).

### **Observation Debrief**

Following the transcription and preliminary coding of a given observation, John and I reviewed the footage together, as he narrated, explained, annotated, and

commentated the footage. His comments were audio-recorded and transcribed. This is a time in which John could explain the nuances of what occurred, point out details I might not have been aware of as a novice player of the same game, or reflect on the experience at large. I saved my questions that I wrote in response to the footage to be asked after his narration, although he tended to address most of them before I asked. In this way, I layered my observations with John's understandings and interpretations as to their translations, significance, and implications. I considered his comments as I prepared for future interviews as well. These debrief interviews were both data in themselves as well as a tool for member-checking and verifying observational data.

### **Theme Co-Analysis**

Throughout the entire data collection phase of the present study, I typically coded data as they become available, so as to begin to notice patterns and themes, address methodological issues, and design further interview questions that are most fruitful. Once all four observations and debriefs and four of the five interviews were transcribed and in the initial coding stages, I conducted the theme co-analysis with John. I pulled out themes that I found across data from constant comparison coding procedures (Glasser, 1965) and returned them back to John. (The specific format of these questions can be found in Appendix B.) For many of the themes, I returned to him his own words from various interviews, observations, and debriefs. In this way, John had an opportunity to extend, qualify, correct, and revise themes so as to help me most accurately represent his views, understandings, and experiences within the data. Again, this interview provided both additional data to be further analyzed as well as tools to member-check and verify previous codes, themes, and findings.

## Research Journal

My research journal became an important source of data as well. This was a place for reflecting on procedures throughout the study, as well as a place for memos regarding immediate reflections on interviews or observations and progressive theme development (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For example, following the first interview, in which John talked at length about areas of his life that have informed his love of gaming, I wrote the following in my research journal about 30 minutes after the interview had ended:

So much of what he talked about was about being the best, whether himself or someone else. He probably talked about famous athletes in sports for a good quarter of the interview. He also talked in terms of his own skill with games—I'm worried people are going to read this and think he is just obnoxious. He's just really that good, but the language he uses to talk about it might be a little off putting because he's just so confident in his ability. I wonder if there is some aspect of this kind of talk in the interview that has to do with any nervousness about being recorded for this project. I know he wants to help me make this an awesome study, so I wonder if there is some level of self-consciousness. There must be, since at one point he referred to me as 'you guys.' As in 'I don't know if you guys remember the game...' Who is he speaking to? Really speaking to? How does that fit with this focus on excellence? Or is excellence a driving force in his game play and this is data, not a byproduct of the process? (Research Journal, November 3, 2011)

I initially planned to maintain a written journal that I contributed regularly during the data collection phase. Instead, I felt the need to write my thoughts upon the completion of a new interview or observation, as well as in the midst of transcribing and coding or after a particularly relevant and enlightening conversation with John during our daily lives. I also wrote about my own novice gaming experiences as, in response to John's enthusiasm about new games on the market, I tried them for myself, so as to have a better understanding of the observations I conducted of John playing them. As a result of the sometime spontaneous and sometimes methodical desire to capture noticings and reflections, my research journal was maintained both in print and via a portable recording

device. Indeed, sometimes, in the midst of a particularly intense conversation with John at the dinner table or driving in the car, I would simply pull out the recorder and ask him to repeat his major point so that I could recall it in his own words. These writings and recording became helpful, allowing me to return to my own ideas and recall leads to follow up on in subsequent interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

"Qualitative data analysis is an iterative process of data collection along with data analysis" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 142, italics in original text). As researchers gather data from participants, they must constantly consider the paths that data is leading them down. Put another way, the collection and analysis are intermingling processes. The analysis stage of this study was both iterative and transparent throughout the present study (Lee & Fielding, 2004). Indeed, in writing this chapter, I really grappled with the level of untangling of data collection and analysis common to most dissertation studies. I acknowledge that much of the discussion presented above could just as easily have been included here. Such is the complexity when one includes data sources that also enable analysis procedures throughout their collection (St.Pierre, 1997), as in the case of the debrief interviews and co-analysis interviews. The two processes for this study were simply impossible for me to disentangle as a researcher. In what follows, I present a discussion more specific to steps taken in the analysis outlined in the discussion of the data sources.



99 guy, then you're not going to reach the next level of play. You're just not. You're not going to  
 100 pick up all the nuances. Your hands are going to learn the motions, the twitch reflex, the different  
 101 aspects, to be able to read your opponents. Even of knowing your opponents, I mean, if you play  
 102 *Modern Warfare* competitively on the competitive servers, then you learn opponents. You learn  
 103 the nuances of who the awesome opponents are, and you know your tricks.  
 104 H.: Do you mean kind of one-at-a-timing it, or do you look for patterns, almost like archetypes,  
 105 of this kind of player or that kind of player?  
 106 J: it's both. It's both. Like, right now, I'm playing basically just *League of Legends* and *Star Wars*  
 107 right now. I'm just trying to get myself to the next level of play on *Star Wars*, but in *Star Wars*,  
 108 now I know the great players. I know what guilds to look for. I know which guilds have good

- What does Dedicated Time Provide:

ME- What does Dedicated Time Provide: [1-Me] - Super [CLICK TO EDIT]

- "Pick up nuances"
- "hands are going to learn the motions"
- "twitch reflex"
- "to be able to read your opponents"
- better "knowing your opponents" either specifically (e.g. Oh, that's Sam. I know how to beat Sam.) and generally (e.g. That guy plays as defensively as Sam, but with a different level of skill. Let me try to adapt upon what I use to beat Sam.)

John later points out (Interview 4; lines 340-347) that playing with other good players saves time by:

- a) providing more experience and opportunities to learn, because as ability goes up, you tend to win more quickly;
- b) offering up advice, based on vicarious learning of the group re: items, stats, quests, etc.

[CLICK TO EDIT]

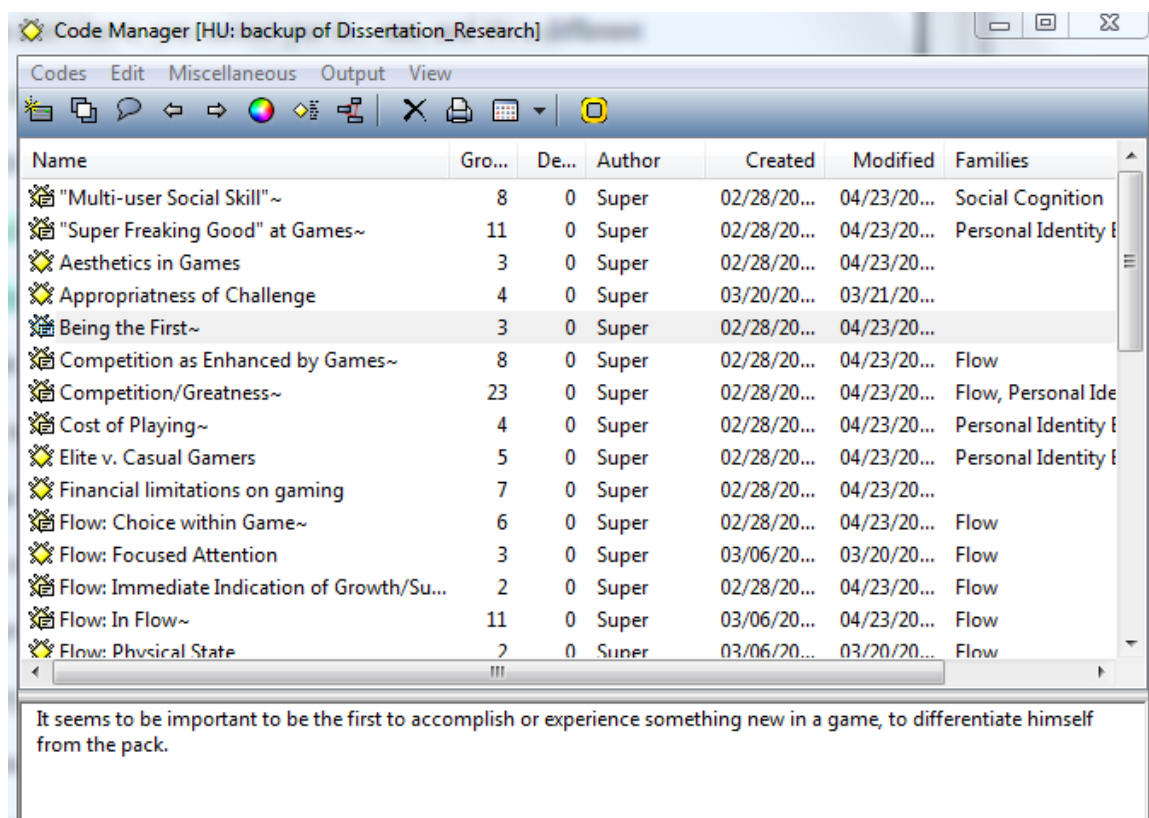
Figure 1: Memo Example

As described above, following each interview and observation, I created memos (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). These differed from general entries in the research journal, in that they were tied to specific datum and served to point out patterns I saw across and within interviews. Memos (see example below) included annotations within transcripts that highlight key quotes or ideas and present comments on the reasons why they initially seem significant or preliminary labels, which evolved into codes over time.

As I maintained memos, I located themes from the data, which I will begin to open-code, which refers to the "tentative development and labeling of concepts in the text that the researcher considers of potential relevance to the problem being studied" (Pidgeon & Henwood, 2004). I created descriptive codes, which allowed me to pull words and phrases from the data themselves, and/or analytic codes, which were more interpretive of the contents of the data.

Once I became immersed myself in transcripts, I established a codebook (Creswell, 2009), in which I recorded carefully worded definitions of codes as they arise in the data, so that I can avoid shifts in definitions as they might occur over the course of data collection and analysis. I maintained the code book via Atlas.ti software, where I not only defined and classified initial codes, but often also pulled particular quotes to serve as

examples of what a particular code looked like, at least as initially conceived. (See Figure 2.) As I continued to progress through transcripts and footage, I held initial themes up against the new data to look for consistencies, discrepancies, and exceptions, often by literally viewing the two documents on a split screen on my laptop, so as to most easily compare and contrast, and often revise codes as they no longer rang true. Such a constant comparison approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) allowed me to strenuously test and retest themes for resilience across the data.



Name	Gro...	De...	Author	Created	Modified	Families
"Multi-user Social Skill"~	8	0	Super	02/28/20...	04/23/20...	Social Cognition
"Super Freaking Good" at Games~	11	0	Super	02/28/20...	04/23/20...	Personal Identity
Aesthetics in Games	3	0	Super	02/28/20...	04/23/20...	
Appropriateness of Challenge	4	0	Super	03/20/20...	03/21/20...	
Being the First~	3	0	Super	02/28/20...	04/23/20...	
Competition as Enhanced by Games~	8	0	Super	02/28/20...	04/23/20...	Flow
Competition/Greatness~	23	0	Super	02/28/20...	04/23/20...	Flow, Personal Ide
Cost of Playing~	4	0	Super	02/28/20...	04/23/20...	Personal Identity
Elite v. Casual Gamers	5	0	Super	02/28/20...	04/23/20...	Personal Identity
Financial limitations on gaming	7	0	Super	02/28/20...	04/23/20...	
Flow: Choice within Game~	6	0	Super	02/28/20...	04/23/20...	Flow
Flow: Focused Attention	3	0	Super	03/06/20...	03/20/20...	Flow
Flow: Immediate Indication of Growth/Su...	2	0	Super	02/28/20...	04/23/20...	Flow
Flow: In Flow~	11	0	Super	03/06/20...	04/23/20...	Flow
Flow: Physical State	2	0	Super	03/06/20...	03/20/20...	Flow

It seems to be important to be the first to accomplish or experience something new in a game, to differentiate himself from the pack.

Figure 2: Coding Manual

In addition to these more traditional approaches to data analysis, I implemented strategies from MDA methods. Scollon and Scollon (2004) have offered several criteria that may be helpful in research attempting to better understand how one constructs meaning in, with, or as expressed through context-sensitive actions. These include considering observational data from most minute and specific lenses to more holistic, global ones. In guiding my noticings of the footage, I constantly asked myself questions ranging from “Exactly what is John, the man at the desk, trying to accomplish via his avatar?” to “How is he using the avatar to engage in the community around him?” (See Scollon (2001) for resources for focusing MDA via thick questioning.) These structures guided me as I struggled to make meaning of intense observed experiences, listen to John share the meanings he makes from them, and talk with him about his perceptions of from where these meanings come. By continuously asking questions about the relationship between John’s discrete choices as he use the avatar to play the game, what those choices accomplished for him, and how they allowed him to present himself in gaming communities, I was able to construct a model for organizing one’s description of game play, which is the focus of Chapter 6, along with the findings relevant to my observations of John.

### **Standards of Quality**

When considering specific criteria by which a researcher displays soundness of method, one should begin with the epistemological and methodological orientation within a given inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Depending upon the positionality within these orientations, quality may carry differing and idiosyncratic nuances. With that in mind, I fully agree with Schwandt’s (1996) suggestion of a “farewell to criteriology” (p. 56), an obsession which has created a great deal of devotion to specific schemes of criteria

beyond the logic of necessity. He argues, rather, that social inquiry would benefit from taking on the form of practical philosophy, characterized by "aesthetic, prudential, and moral considerations as well as more conventionally scientific ones" (Schwandt, 1996, p. 68). Such an approach fosters "critical intelligence" so as to engage the research community within the moral critique of research rather than haggling over the countless interpretations of what counts as validity. I have organized my understanding of quality for the present study through Schwandt's three characteristics of practical philosophy: aesthetic quality, prudential quality, and moral quality.

### **Aesthetic Quality**

This study must be relevant and authentic to a very specific audience. In order to do so, I have given much thoughtful consideration to how I have crafted narrative voice (for both John and myself), description, and storying throughout the final document in such a way as to both inform and engage our audiences. Indeed, as I conducted interviews with John, he often turned to memories of specific events that illustrated pivotal or exemplary moments in his gaming experiences across time. Rather than attempt to summarize these engaging and illustrative moments within the findings of this study, I reconstructed them into think scenes, which are brief narratives built around discrete datum appearing across a qualitative study and intended to "*show* this, not tell it" (Fitzgerald & Noblit, 1999, p. 60, italics in the original). I imagined these think scenes to encompass a variety of genres to most efficiently convey the gist of John's expression of what it means to be a gamer, the types of experiences that are important to that identity, and the specifics that add to thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973). Due to the evolution of these accounts as multi-genre, as well as the fact that data informing them often came from multiple interviews, these think scenes are fictionalized to a degree. (See Chapter 4.) As often as possible, however,

I wove in direct quotations from interviews into the texts, indicated by italics. I selected think scenes in the coding process as I realized that particular memories he shared emphasized particular aspects of the role that video games and gaming communities have had in his life. I returned each think scene to John to ensure that they rang true to his experiences and that the voice, gist, events, and affect were accurate to his understandings and memories. These conversations ensured that I avoided the pit-fall of substituting creativity and cleverness for substance (Eisner, 1997).

I have taken great care to present these think scenes to be both artful and methodologically sound. A growing number of researchers are writing storied narratives in ways that combine empirical and aesthetic descriptions of the human condition (Alvermann, 2002). The fictional nature of several of the above think scenes does not detract from their validity. Indeed, as Eisner (1997) has pointed out, we are often struck by the ring of truth that we find in fictional narratives; what is critical is the substance, dispositions, and authenticity of the experiences for those who live them.

In choosing to convey John's formative gaming experiences through aesthetic, fictionalized think scenes, his gaming history takes on an engaging quality. This is important for two reasons. Firstly, John expects this research be accessible and truthful to gamers outside of the academy; he wants his peers in gaming communities to read resulting documents of this study and nod their heads in sympathy with the descriptions found within. One way to make any lived experience more accessible and relatable is through narrative accounts (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). Secondly, some qualitative researchers view narrative approaches toward representing data as a way to illuminate the general in the specific (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). While one's experience can be viewed as individual, human beings are intimately connected to the storied lives with which they

come in contact, each of which impacts the nuances and directions of their own paths. Furthermore, each story is based on a lifetime of experiences that shape and mold individuals into our present selves, as well as whom we continue to become. From this perspective, knowledge constructed from narrative research is dependent on many shifting sands, creating knowledge that, according to Geertz is “lumbering, shaky, and badly formed” ( as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 8). By recreating specific scenes from John’s lived experiences, I am able to present the reader with glimpses of John as he has storied himself with an academic audience in mind.

### **Prudential Quality**

I understand Schwandt’s (1996) notion of a study’s prudential quality to refer to the logistical soundness and clarity of methodological, analytical, and theoretical inner-workings. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) outline several such qualities that are typically valued within qualitative research paradigms, of which I have selected three that more authentically relate to the purpose and procedure of the research presented here: apparency, verisimilitude, and transferability.

**Apparency..** Apparency is understood to refer to the extent to which the findings of a study are grounded within data and articulated in ways that clearly outline those groundings (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The purpose is simply to ensure that the claims made within a study are justifiable within the data collected. I have maintained apparency so as to hold myself accountable to the data. This study presents a level of apparency via the audit trails I have constructed (e.g. memos, a research journal, and coding manual), providing a measure of reflexivity, the process through which researchers identify, examine, and understand how social backgrounds and assumptions can impact research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Apparency is also established as I

collaborated with other researchers, included fellow doctoral students and professors) to construct a peer response community (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), from whom I received feedback as to the validity of findings and identify possible biases throughout the study. Both of these resources afforded me opportunities to verify that my findings are indeed grounded in the data John and I constructed.

**Verisimilitude.** The authenticity of research findings is a critical measure of quality (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I address this criterion through extensive member checking, triangulation, and prolonged engagement (Creswell, 2009). Member checking, as it exists in this study, is so critical as to be woven into the very methods themselves, rather than an isolated revisionary step at the end data analysis. Throughout the data collected and analysis, I return John's words and my initial themes to him repeatedly for confirmation or extension. Triangulation may be seen as I have linked data sources to each other for confirmation or disagreement. For example, in as I considered observational data, I found myself returning to semi-structured and debrief interviews for places where similar ideas are expressed or where there seems to be divergences. And finally, while the entire duration of the data collection phase of this study occurred over six month, some of the data has been based upon over a decade of conversations about John's gaming, my apprenticeship into gaming, debates about the worth of video games, and observations of how each of us play. This prolonged engagement with my participant provided me with a longitudinal perspective of his gaming, which was as often as not just as much an affordance as it was a limitation as I was led to reconsider John's practices and beliefs that I may have taken for granted.

**Transferability.** For research to matter beyond the printed word, researchers and stakeholders must put into action or make connections with themes and findings

determined to be presented convincingly within the data. Individuals, such as John and myself, must be called to act upon or with the findings from research, if research is to be worth the conducting of it. Anderson (2006) calls for a commitment to an analytic agenda, which he describe as "data-transcending practices that are directed toward theoretical development, refinement, and extension" (p. 387). In short, findings should move theory. Across this study, I have regularly considered the extent to which the present data might lead to new understandings relevant to literacy and learning; as a result, this work has generated possible directions in gaming theory and pedagogy.

### **Moral Quality**

Ethical considerations are a key component of the moral quality of a study, as well as simple care for participants, contexts, and audiences related to the study. I find the concepts of reflexivity and representation to be helpful in framing the ways in which I provide for moral quality. Reflexivity "involves an awareness of reciprocal influence between ethnographers and their settings and informants" (Anderson, 2006). Wells (2011) has pointed out that a range of approaches towards reflexivity present different methods of ensuring moral treatment of participants. I have incorporated several reflexive practices across this study, including *reflexivity as introspection*, as I reflected my positionality and its impact on John and the content of this study; *intersubjective reflexivity*, as I considered how John's position in my life as spouse and co-researcher inform the choices I make throughout the inquiry; and *reflexivity as discursive deconstruction* as I have regularly returned John's words back to him, to tease apart areas of tension. Representation, which relates to reflexivity, has also been important to me as the researcher of this dissertation study. Because John and I are entering each other's separate domains within this study (e.g. he into the domain of academic research and I



into an intensely elite gaming domain), each of us has been concerned with representation of ourselves to the other's world. Careful consideration of representation has been important throughout all phases of this study by both myself and John.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Researching someone close to the researcher prompts several ethical questions. Am I, for example, taking advantage of a captive participant? How will I handle tensions between representation and honesty in reporting data? With two distinct purposes between us, which gets priority in the final product, if need be? Across the duration of this study, these questions have challenged me to negotiate my role as a researcher in critical ways. There have been times during which I have wondered whether a particular quotation might misrepresent John to an academic audience who may have difficulty relating to his sometimes iconoclastic perspectives. Throughout the proposed study, mutual respect for both each other and the project at hand has been critical. John has understood that he is free to end this study if at any point in time he so chose. In turn, I understand that, just like any participant, John agreed (with a great deal of foreknowledge) to offer a great deal of time to this project. Even before data collection began, John took the training required by my institutions Internal Review Board (IRB) in order to preemptively be fully informed of his role and rights as a participant in this study. The fact the he has his own personal stake in the study assured me that our work will be meaningful to him as well as to myself as the researcher, as evidenced by so many extracurricular conversations along the trajectory of our work together. As co-creator, participant, and co-researcher, John's voice and purposes have shaped this study powerfully.

### Writing Up of the Study

In keeping with the advocacy/participatory stance I bring to this research, I recognize that representation of research participants is a particularly important issue (Creswell, 2009). Throughout the planning of an appropriate methodology, I have considered ways in which to most authentically represent John's experiences, perspectives, and voice. He has had multiple opportunities to reflect upon and add to his own data, via debriefing interviews, theme co-analysis, and member checks.

While John is indeed the object of this study, it has been my intention to invite him to add his voice to an academic domain, and therefore fostering a level of agency, through this inquiry. As the researcher, however, I have been responsible for final decisions as to the use of quotations, revelation of personal experiences, and methodological procedures. In acknowledging this, I also acknowledge the fact that I am in a position of power, which John cannot share. This power comes with a responsibility to John, who has allowed me to share his story and generously giving his time to this project. Certainly I have returned all findings, chapters, and particular quotation to him, and thankfully, there have been very few points on which we could not come to solve as a consensus. At those rare times of disagreement, however, the weight of a researcher power surprised and chafed at me. It is my hope that, through our work together, I can honor the voice that he brings to his story.

In what follows, I will present the data and findings resulting from the procedures outlined in this chapter. Chapter 4 is comprised of *think scenes* (Fitzgerald & Nolbit, 1999), or narrative reconstructions based upon retellings of events within interviews from the data. These think scenes are interspersed with timelines of John's gaming history, in

which I have chronologically listed key video games he has played across time. All italicized words in the think scenes are direct quotations from interview transcripts.

I have chosen to present these think scenes as a separate, literary expression of data resulting from my interviews with John. Doing so allows me to introduce John to the reader more holistically and artfully than through bits of data peppered throughout expository description and analysis, which follows in Chapter 5. The think scenes also provide a space for me to present data relevant to significant moments of play across John's life history, those which were formative to his gaming identity and that illustrate important themes relevant to what it means to be an elite gamer. Several of them explicitly present images of how John began to position himself in relation to games in his childhood, commenting on what they were for and how John used them.

Chapter 5 then turns to a consideration of the ways in which gaming is a tool for identity construction and revision for John. Throughout Chapter 5, I often refer to specific think scenes from Chapter 4, so as to directly comment on the scenes' relationship to larger themes and position them in the larger conversation about John's gaming. Chapter 6 then applies mediated discourse analysis to consider the intersection of John and gaming events, leading to a theoretical model that is helpful in describing significant moments of play from the lens of symbiotic flow. There I present my theory of symbiotic flow and relate it to John's use of games.

## CHAPTER 4

## CRITICAL MOMENTS COMPOSING JOHN

**Narrative Think Scenes from a Life of Gaming****In the Beginning...**

"Dude, you coming over to Holly's?"

"Yep. After school, right?"

"Same as usual."

"I'm kickin' your tail today, though, John. Last time was a bunch of bull crap." I can't remember if Craig beat me that day or not, but at the time, a boy's very honor hinged on his number of wins and loses.

*Holly was my girlfriend. I say she was my girlfriend, because at the time you needed to have a girlfriend and she fit the bill. She was pretty, and nice, and was the only kid in Faith, North Carolina, with her very own ColecoVision. When your parents are working at a brake factory, the police department, or at the Food Lion, you don't really have a lot of extra money lying around to spend on a video game. No one was more thankful than I, though, that the exception was Holly's family. My buddies, Craig and Jake, and I played *Pong* for hours at her house every day after school. No one at our own homes missed us too much; they were either working or exhausted from a grueling day and didn't want us kids around. Which was fine by us, since we had plenty of dirt hills to ride bikes off of, forts to build, and general mayhem to cause. That is until we fell in love with the muted dub...dub...dub and the glow of the green pixels moving across the screen in *Pong*.*

*Video games were akin to magic. Where else could you so immediately gratify a young boy's appetite for competition and entertainment in one fell swoop? In what other*

past times can you be clearly better at a challenge than you were just 30 minutes ago?

And I'm not going to pretend it wasn't a point of pride or disgrace when my buddies and I compared high scores.

Alas, it was a brief relationship, between Holly and I, I mean. We broke up one day, because she asked me to hang out with her, and I declined, preferring to wreak havoc on a stretch of pavement in the streets of Faith, where Jake and I met Craig with our bikes. Holly was devastated. I got an Atari 2600 that Christmas. She ended up the head cheerleader in high school. I think she won out.

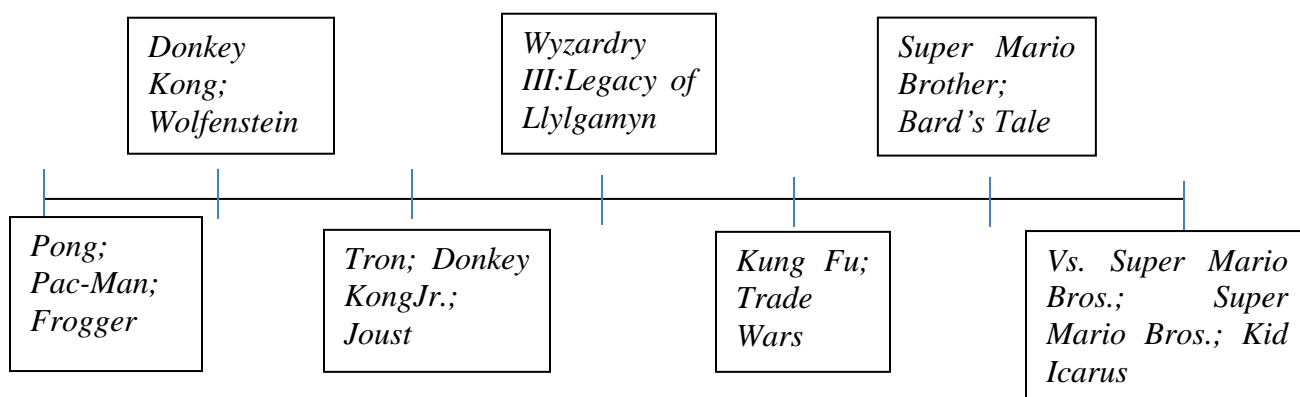


Figure 3: John's Gaming Timeline (1980-1986)

### **A Morning at the Cue**

It was 11:27 on a Tuesday morning at The Cue, the musty pool hall on the side of town not typically frequented by the white community in Salisbury, NC. Jason and I, we'd been in line for about half an hour just to get our turn to play, since the only other games they had were Pacman and pinball. Yeah, I probably should have been taking that History exam today, but pass or fail, it was all the same at home, so...there I stood.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw this dude walk in, scan the room, and walk directly over to a somewhat dumbfounded Jason and me. *I'd never seen him before. A clean-cut black guy, probably five years older than us*, he had a smirk on his face and was the best-dressed dude in the place. He just stuck out like a sore thumb. His name was Isaiah. I know this *because he handed Jason a business card*, which, from over his shoulder I could see had his name printed neatly across the top. The card read "Professional *Street Fighter* Player."

"Are you freakin' kidding me?!" Jason demanded.

"No, dude. This is what I do," Isaiah said.

"Ah, you might be in the wrong place because this is where WE do what we do," I chimed in.

"Who's gonna play me first?"

Jason and I flipped for who got to deal with this scrub first. "Damn," Jason hissed.

I was up first.

*There was no question in my mind that I could beat this dude. No question.* I flipped my quarter in the *Super Street Fighter: Championship Edition* cabinet, hearing the digitally synthesized theme music twanging in the background as I selected Ryu. Isaiah just as quickly and calmly chose Guile. Okay, so this would be a game of aggressor versus defender.

Round One: He won.

Round Two: I knew him now. From round one, I learned just about everything I needed to know about this guy's Guile game: he played as defensively as possible, hiding behind flip kicks, sonic booms, and upper cuts, trying to make me come to him. Not gonna happen this time.

The round started, and I quickly kicked Isaiah's Guile out of his flip kick, not once, but twice. I was already ahead on life, and we were just getting started. At that point, knowing that defense was where he was most comfortable, I just sat back in my corner to force him to come to me. He didn't know how to push the fight. I won.

Round Three: I had him on his heels from the word go. The frantic music of the game. The non-descript civilians cheering from behind our characters. Even the now oily surface of the joystick seemed to fade away. I didn't know where Jason was. I just knew that this guy was doomed. It wasn't personal. It's just that if it had to be him or me sitting down, I'd rather it be him. I pushed the fight, and pushed his skill. And won. He was good, I'll give him that. I could only beat him *at the very edge of my skill*.

Driving back home, after being escorted to the door of The Cue as the owner locked up at the end of a profitable day, I couldn't help but say it. "You think that Isaiah dude was sent as like a hired gun to shut us down?"

Jason looked at me like I was an idiot. "Oh, absolutely! Did you see the way that guy bee-lined straight over to us?"

Nice.

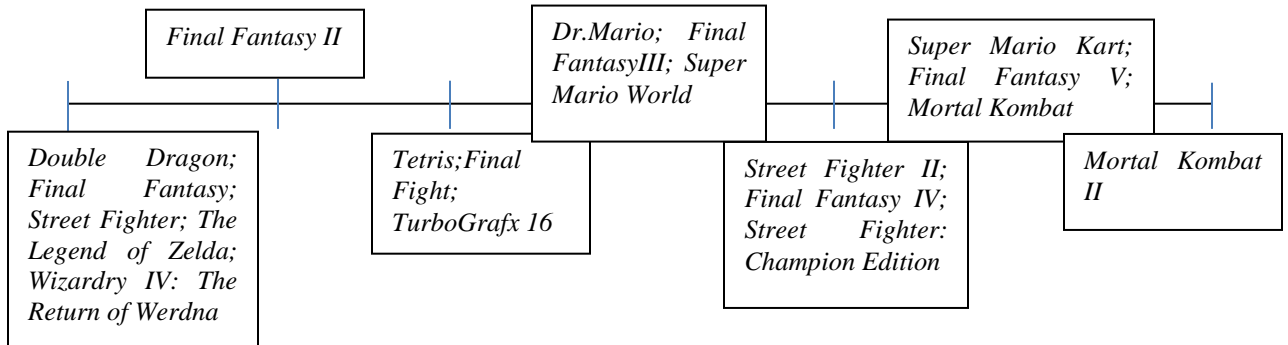


Figure 4: John's Gaming Timeline (1987-1993)



## How to Ruin a LAN Party

**Wednesday, 2:13 pm:** Tony, from work, invites me to their LAN party. He tells me he and his buddies play *Quake* together. Says they're really good. Says they'll take it easy on me and that, if I want to, I can bring a buddy. I think I will.

**Friday, 4:22 pm:** Jason just pulls into town from North Carolina, with his PC, monitor, keyboard, and mouse in the back seat of his car. It's probably the largest amount of time he's been away from *Quake* in a solid month. He's jonesing. It's gonna be on tonight!

**7:00 pm:** We pull up to Tony's place. It's a pretty typical bachelor's pad: functional furniture, no real décor to speak of, and a kitchen full of cold beers, 2-liters of Mountain Dew and lukewarm pizzas. The nectar of the gods. I made introductions while Jason and I set up our equipment. Looking around the room, I didn't know but a couple of guys, and they were busy looking for misplaced mouse-pads or reliving old games with what I took for long-term gaming buddies. They say they're really, really good.

**8:48 pm:** The last guy just got his equipment hooked and booted up. He could've been ready 20 minutes ago if he would've stopped running his mouth. I am fully caffeinated and ready to go. The rules are free-for-all, so no teams. It's all v. all. And, by the way, I hear they are really, really, ridiculously good. It's getting deep in here.

**9:07 pm:** The games are loading. It's go time, boys!

**9:18 pm:** The only things I hear are the hollow sounds of gunshot, the echoing footsteps of my character, and his grunt as he leaps from perches to score a kill. That and the profanity pouring from the mouths of more than one of the players around me. I'm in my zone. Jason's in his zone. We are on tonight! Oh, and I'm calling bullshit on their hype.

**9:43 pm:** Is it just me, or have the rules changed? Jason and I seem to be the only ones the other six are after. We have been straight up murdering them for the past half hour; I'm pretty sure we're wrecking their party.

**10:00 pm:** Yup. It's official. This free for all is now 6 v. 2: Jason and I are the targets of the night. The crazy thing is that we are both in our zone tonight. No one can touch us. Come get us, scrubs!

**10:30 pm:** So we've got 6 men hunting us down like a pack of wolves. For an hour and a half. And we've not died once.

**11:12 pm:** *My actions are sharp. I can predict my opponents' moves, steps before they are doing them. I know what they're going to do. I read them. My eyes don't miss a thing on the heads-up display. I don't miss anything. I don't make mental errors that cost me kills or resources. It all seems to unfold exactly like I plan it. It's not like fate makes it do like that, it's just when I'm on like this, it unfolds exactly like I want it to unfold. I know what my opponent's best is and I know that my best can beat it.*

**11:45 pm:** This room is getting tense. The air is heavy with the heat of eight PCs humming and 6 men cursing. The scent of pizza and beer does nothing for the ambiance. Jason and I have pretty officially destroyed the party. The others are starting to log off, play X-Box, or just stand around and chat. Damn. And these are good guys too, over-confidence aside.

**12:02 am:** Jason just shut down his computer and mine is half packed up. We're keeping the conversation with the natives friendly, but they're clearly pissed.

**12:30 am:** We roll out of Tony's drive way. I tried to mend a few fences before we left, but I think everyone was just kind of waiting for us to leave. No skin off my nose. Jason and I are heading back to my apartment.

**12:57 am:** Logging on to *Quake*...

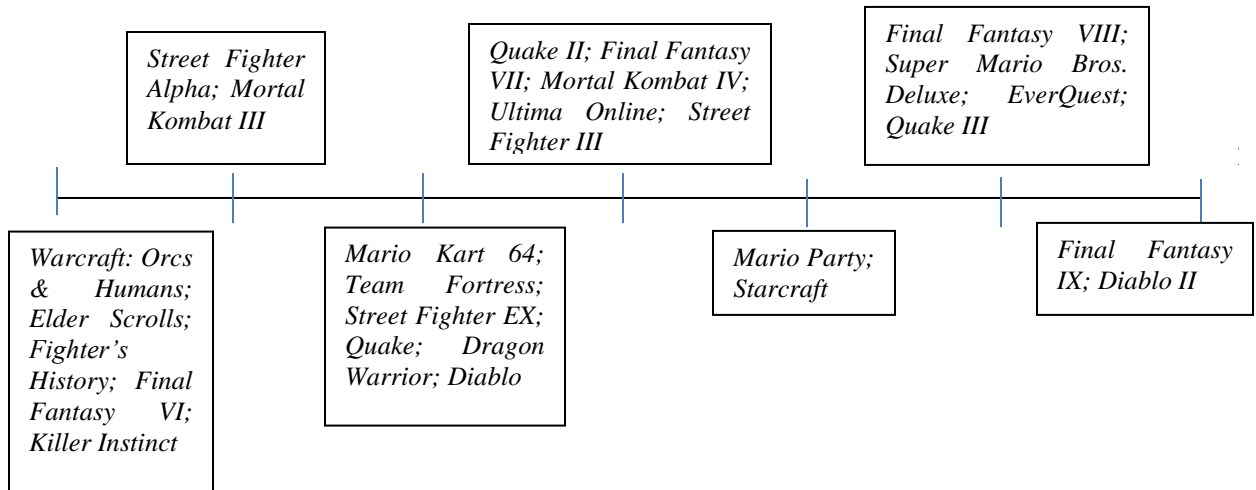


Figure 5: John's Gaming Timeline (1994-2000)

### Death by Group Chat

Group Chat from World of Warcraft dungeon raid- 5 versus 5

**John:** Alright, so what's the game plan, people?

**Snarf:** Uh, guys, I need another beer. AFK.

**Sephiroth22 :** The plan is: Win. Newb

**Romeo:** I'm gonna tank, and Juliet is gonna heal me.

**John:** Uh, you mean heal us?

**Romeo:** No. That's our thing. She's my girlfriend in RL, so she's gonna heal me.

**Sephiroth22 :** Quit acting like you're not gay.

**John:** Ummm...right, but we're all going to take damage here, so she needs to be able to heal ALL of us.

**Romeo:** Nope.

**John:** ...

**Romeo:** Seriously, dude. Step off my chick.

**John:** Oh my God, dude. Are you serious? Okay, so then who's gonna heal me?

**Romeo:** Not my problem.

**John:** Not your problem? So if I'm constantly dead, that helps you how?

**Romeo:** Not my problem.

**John:** Juliet, are you there?

**Juliet:** Um, yeah. So, how do I play?

**John:** Are you freakin' kidding me? You have a level 50 healer, and you don't know how to play her?

**Romeo:** Shut it, dude. It's my healer. She's gonna play it.

**John:** Nice. Okay, Juliet, have you played a healer before at all?

**Juliet:** I played.... Trevor, what was that one thing I played in *Final Fantasy*, with the purple dress, and the black hair? She had a cool bracelet that had magic.

**Romeo:** I told you; you have to call me Romeo. That's why we changed my character's name. I don't know what you're talking about.

**Juliet:** You're an ass. You don't remember?

**John:** Um, guys, the game's about to start. Here's what we're going to do: I'll flank to the right...

**Juliet:** Trevor, you're a freakin' ass that you don't remember that crap. The only reason I played that stupid game was so we could play together. And you don't even remember?!

**Romeo:** Sara, not now!

**Sephiroth22 :** Hey Juliette!! A/S/L? I hear you might be breaking up with TREVOR.

<<Game is loading>>

**Juliet:** Shut up. I am two seconds from deleting this character.

**Romeo:** Screw you. You don't even know how. Now, quit screwing around and buff my character. You're gonna ruin the game.

**Juliet:** *I'm* gonna ruin the game?!!!! You are *unbelievable!* Trish was right... you're a complete loser.

**Sephiroth22 :** Dude, I'm taking screen shots of this shit. Epic!

<<Juliet has logged off>>

**Sephiroth22 :** HAHHAHAHAHAH! You suck, TREVOR.

**John:** Uh, Romeo? Sephiroth? Okay, so it's gonna be 4 v 5, so we need to...

<<Romeo has logged off>>

**Snarf:** Back with muh beers. I'm loaded n ready to roll.

<<Game begins>>

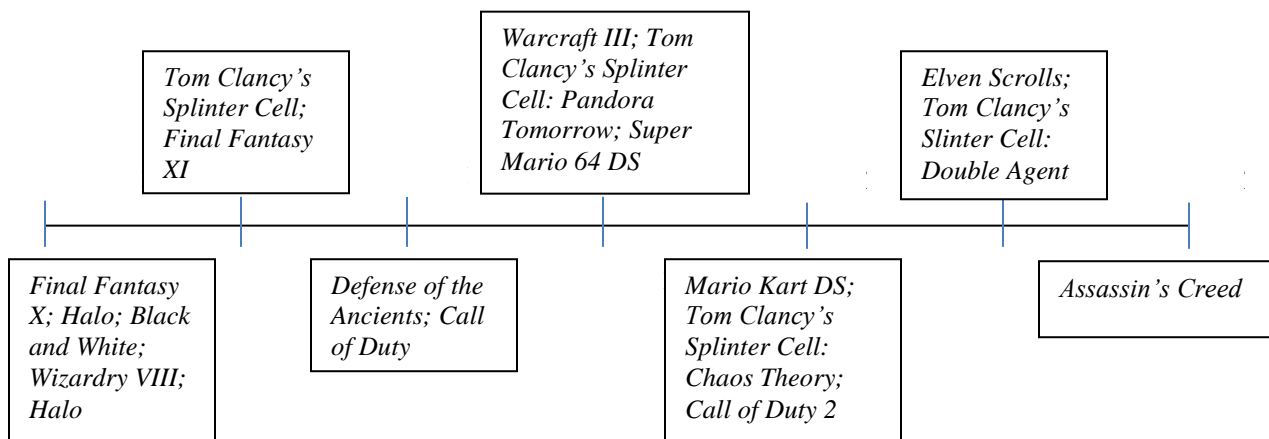


Figure 6: John's Gaming Timeline (2001-2007)

**Re-Reading John: Writing “A Morning at the Cue”**

FADE IN:

INTERIOR. JOHN'S HOME OFFICE- LATE AT NIGHT

John sits at his computer playing *Star Wars: The Old Republic*; Heather is seated in an easy chair to his right, with her laptop resting on her extended legs.

HEATHER

Hey, Babe. You busy.

JOHN

(talking loudly with headset blaring)

What? Oh, hold on. Almost done.

HEATHER

Okay.

(a few minutes go by as John finishes a raid; Heather reads and types energetically)

JOHN

(taking off his headset)

What's up?

HEATHER

I just finished this vignette, like just this minute. Do you have a second to read it?

JOHN

Yeah, sure.

(John turns his chair to situate Heather's laptop on his lap as he reads for several minutes; Heather leans forward excitedly)

This is bad.

HEATHER

What?!

JOHN

You got it all wrong.

HEATHER

I just said what you said in the interview. You skipped school to play *Street Fighter* at the Cue. It's just recounting...

JOHN

I get what it is. It's just not accurate at all.

HEATHER

Well, then you didn't really explain it. I totally just said what you said.

JOHN

Your interpretation is just wrong. Or... your interpretation is incomplete. Look, okay, so the first line says...

HEATHER

You know, I really can't talk about this right now.

JOHN

Look, I'm trying to help you make it better.

HEATHER

(taking the laptop back from John)

Well, I have hurt feelings right now, so I really don't want to talk about it.

JOHN

(putting headset back on)

I'm just trying to help.

(Heather sits reading and re-reading the vignette; she deletes and restores it several times before closing the laptop, finally huffing out of the room)

FADE TO:

INTERIOR. TWO DAYS LATER: JOHN AND HEATHER'S LIVING ROOM-MID-EVENING

John sits on a tan sofa with a printed initial copy of "Morning at the Cue" in his hand.

(See Appendix C.) Heather sits on an adjacent love seat with a recorder in hand.

JOHN

*So, alright, I just re-read this. The first line is "I have to win." I played Super Street Fighter: Championship Edition back before anyone really played it competitively and I mean I played night and day. It was an addiction for me. I was the only person, that I knew, that gave a damn about being good at it. By the time I started playing other people, I was so far ahead of them, it was ridiculous. Like, it was almost not even fun for me to play them because they just hadn't had the time to invest in the game. Me and Jason, we were easily the best two players in North Carolina. I mean, there's no doubt in my mind. We'd traveled all over the place; we'd played every place we could find. There was very little competition. Not to say that they were bad players because they were not bad players. It was just that we literally played probably twice as much as they did. So the first line is "I have to win." At this point in my life, I was cocky to the point of ridiculousness. It never even crossed my mind that I could lose.*

HEATHER

*See, and in hind sight, I heard what you said in the interview and then added a layer of inference that imagined what I would have felt as a teenager, when confidence is not always...*



## JOHN

*Let me tell you: confidence...I never had a problem in my life with confidence. But the next part is pretty correct. 11:27 on a Tuesday morning- that was, we were almost certainly playing video games at that point. Jason and I were together almost every single day, so it was definitely us two. "I probably should've been taking my history exam;" I missed a lot of history exams that I should've taken. You had me say "Focus, John": I never had a problem with focus. I'm telling you, I was confident, I wasn't even overconfident. I was confident and I delivered, so when you're confident and you deliver, you're not overconfident. You're right on confident.*

(The two laugh and continue talking as the camera fades out.)

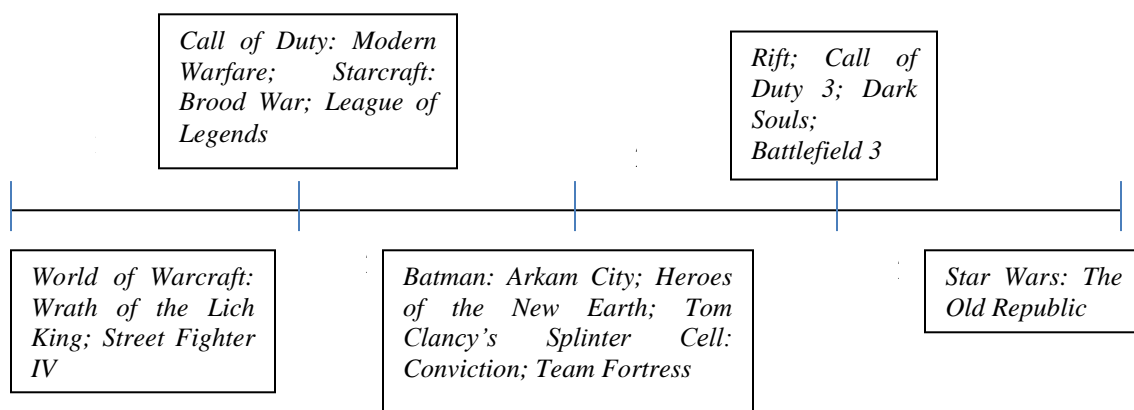


Figure 7: John's Gaming Timeline (2008-2012)

## CHAPTER FIVE

## FINDINGS:

## THE COMPONENTS OF A GAMER

“And every move for them is a calculated, dedicated move. They have a set defense. They have a set offense. It's not accidental. It's not whimsical. They know what the hell they're doing. If you play them, and you don't know what the hell you're doing, they're going to destroy you.” (Interview 4, 3.4.2012, 487-489)

The primary focus of this dissertation centers on what elite gaming means and looks like from John's perspective. More particularly, it looks closely at the experiences of John, a successful, elite gamer, to understand what it means to be a gamer, from his perspective. In this chapter and the next, I present the findings to the primary research question guiding this inquiry: What does it mean to be an elite gamer, to one life-long player? Additionally, I present findings to address the following sub-questions: a) What aspects of elite gaming are important and meaningful to one gamer? b) What moments of play does this gamer identify as significant? c) What does sustained play look like for one elite gamer?

In this chapter, I address the primary research question and the first sub-question by describing the identities and practices, as described by Gee (2000; 2007;2009), that are significant to John's engagement with games and their surrounding communities. More specifically, here I will present findings pertaining to *who* John is as an elite gamer, as well as his formative practices. I will explicate the ways in which the think scenes in Chapter 4 of this dissertation illustrate major themes throughout our interviews across this study. Discussions of who John is as an elite gamer and the kinds of practices that are central to his gaming address the question of what it means to be an elite gamer, for John. In the next chapter, I will discuss findings relevant to *what he does* as an elite gamer.

Key findings pertaining to who he is as a gamer include: a) Time is the primary resource in John's elite gaming world, because it represents a level of dedication and insider status; b) John values particular affordances in his gaming, namely experiences that develop knowledge and skills that can then be applied instantaneously in gaming contexts and be harnessed for longitudinal participation; c) Video games provide John, and players like him, with possibilities for greatness, an aspect of his identity that is both critically important to him and often strikingly absent outside of games.

### **Time is John's Greatest Resource as an Elite Gamer**

Across the years that John and I have been married, I have often been bothered by the immense amount of time that he spends playing video games. This annoyance was in part due to the fact that, as a mother, wife, teacher, and doctoral student, I rarely have had time to relax the way I would have wished during evenings and weekends. It was hard to hear him enjoy a game in the other room while I graded essays just before reading a few chapters for class the next night. The frustration was also a result of knowing so little about what John was doing in his games and what they meant to him. Had he been doing something that I understood and could relate to more immediately, such as reading or playing an instrument, I think my view of the hours upon hours of his dedication would have resulted in a sense of admiration. As it was, I was incredibly annoyed by his gaming, often chiding him to quit wasting his time or guiltting him into joining me for a movie instead. The primary reason was the amount of *time* that his gaming always required.

Across the interviews of this study, the importance of time quickly became apparent. In our first interview, John went into great detail regarding how one becomes an expert gamer. He began by explaining:

An elite gamer is someone who spends an inordinate amount of time and investment it into the game, and they happen to be pretty good at games. The time factor can overcome your skill eventually, because if you play it long enough you just get good at it eventually. But, you're always gonna be behind the curve, unless you happen to somehow get hooked up with a really good guild. (Interview 1, 11.3.2011, 178-182)

He continued, both in this interview and across the other four, by describing the amount of time required to learn a new game, reach the end-game content, complete quests at maximum levels, play downloadable content, establish himself in guilds, research strategies and opponents, and exert a presence on message boards. When talking about how he has become such an elite gamer, he talked about the correlational relationship between time and ability within a game, explaining that

...the investment in the flat playing field is time. If you can't invest time into a video game, you're not going to be great. You're just not going to be...If you can't put yourself in a position to play more than the next guy, then you're not going to reach the next level of play. You're just not. You're not going to pick up all the nuances. Your hands aren't going to learn the motions, the twitch reflex, the different aspects, to be able to *read* your opponents. (Interview 4, 3.4.2012, 96-101)

By framing the discussion of experience in terms of *investments*, John made it clear that time is not just a side effect of enjoying video games, but a requirement of becoming skilled enough to enjoy the game at the level of elite gamers.

These understanding led me to wonder what this time investment does for John, as a gamer, and how he uses time invested into gaming as a way to enact his gaming identity. In the context of the discussion that follows regarding John's use of time in his

gaming practices, the metaphor *time is a resource* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003) is used by John across interviews and the presentation of relevant findings.

Lakoff and Johnson's (1980/2003) discussion of metaphor is important to the understanding of time as a resource, as well as to the analysis of this dissertation as a whole. As I located themes within John's interviews, he used a variety of metaphors to articulate his experience with games, such as in the quote "the investment in the flat playing field is time" (Interview 4, 3.4.2012, 96). Since language indicates ways that one inscribes meaning (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003), this investment metaphor emerged as important in considering what it means to be an elite gamer.

John and I talked about *investing, spending, and saving time* in ways that present time as a finite commodity he used judiciously. It is important, however, to view this resource as less concrete than one might view currency, for example. While time is indeed finite (i.e. there can only ever be 24 hours in a day), time spent in virtual world is flexibly layered. For example, within a 4 hour window, one might spend 3.5 hours playing a video game, while spending 30 minutes chatting on Facebook, and hour looking up strategy guides, and another 30 minutes listening to podcasts. Were one to calculate the time *spent* engaged in these activities, it would certainly add up to more than 4 hours. While time in the real world similarly allows individuals to multitask, they are limited by space in ways that they are not in virtual worlds. For example, if I was to boil pasta for dinner while I catch up on emails and watch my daughter paint, I am multitasking. I am doing so, however, only with those tasks that I can accomplish within the parameters of an area of my home. These limits do not exist in virtual spaces, allowing greater breadth of simultaneous activities.

As with any valued resource, gamers tend to seek ways to get the most of it for the least investment; as a result, gamers, as well as other members of virtual spaces, tend to seek ways in which to collapse real-world time to receive greater *dividends* of virtual time. In other words, the ability to collapse time, to multi-task, is a necessary skill. In what follows, I present findings pertaining to the ways in which John *capitalizes* on his use of time as a critical resource.

### **John Invests Time to Gain Experience**

For certain levels of greatness to be possible in a given field, research suggests a minimum of 10,000 hours of engaged time in the domain is necessary (Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2008). The timelines that intersperse Chapter 4, which includes over 93 video games that John has played and is organized by the years in which he played each, indicate that John has dedicated a massive amount of time to games over the course of 32 years. (It is worth noting that the timeline is not exhaustive, but a collection of games that John named throughout interviews and via a brief jot-list he created for the purposes of this study.) He played each game for varied amounts of time, some for just a couple of weeks and others he played almost daily for several years. Games that he tends to dedicate the least amount of time to are those, typically console games, that have linear story lines and limited options to exhaust and innovate characters' experiences. MMO RPGs, however, typically require a longer duration of game play, in that there are hundreds of players with which he might engage with during a gaming session, new content added regularly, and multiple types of character for playing to maximum levels (often referred to as leveling). For example, to level a character to the highest level possible in *Star Wars: The Old Republic (SW:TOR)*, John spent 144 hours, according to

the game's accumulated time measures. For him, however, the game doesn't truly begin until he reaches the highest level, 50, at which point he can begin focusing on player-versus-player (PVP) game play. This level of time commitment is what John attributes his success and status in the games that he plays.

John explained the role of time as the currency of gaming by talking about the returns that result in coming to master the mechanics of the game itself. In sitting down to a new game, he described the steps he takes to simply learn it from the beginning:

I usually spend about an hour to two hours learning the interface, running around, doing the newbie quests, and stuff like that. Do the newb stuff that starts out at the beginning of the game. So, that said, what I do is I explore the preferences and see what I'm able to do. And then, the next thing I do this is, I get to a point where I want to do something, and I can't find it, I'll Google it, and see if anyone else has already asked the question. (Interview 2, 1.9.2012, 412-425)

The interface of a game refers to the organization of the resources players are expected to find and use simply to navigate the game. This might include a map, indication of health statistics (e.g. health bar, hit points, etc.), chat text, executable abilities, equipment, and quest information. Once he locates these features, he then begins to explore the game to determine the possibilities designed by the creators. When he reaches a point at which simple process of hypothesis, experiment, and evaluation does not help him figure out an aspect of the game, he will then use online peripheral texts, or those text surrounding and enhancing game experiences (Johnson, 2008), to support the solving of the particular problem at hand.

After the initial discovery stages of learning a new game, John then spends his time accomplishing the tasks, events, and contests woven throughout its design, based on the *meta* ascribed to the game. As John explained, "Meta means what the overall norm is for the game, something you can predict about the game" (Interview 2, 1.9.2011, 36-37).

At this point, John has learned the established mechanics within the game and is able to focus more on the actual game play rather than navigating the interface and discrete functionalities, freeing up attention for enjoyment and competition.

In addition to becoming facile with the functionalities of a game, there is a certain level of muscle memory that comes as John spends greater amounts of time engaged in a particular game. Gamers refer to this as a *twitch reflex*, which is “the ability to take in data and act on it in milliseconds, because that’s the difference. The difference between someone who is great at first-person shooters and someone who is mediocre or bad is just milliseconds. That’s all it is” (Interview 2, 1.9.2011, 17-19). As players move from more basic game play at the beginning of a game, in this case a first-person shooter, in which the player experiences the view of the game as if they were looking through the character’s eyes and shooting projectiles, their hands develop reflexes. As levels and opponents become more difficult, the reflexes must become so finely tuned as to require almost imperceptible lapses between realizing they must shoot and the time at which they press the button to cause the character to do so. This comes only through hours of practice, so as to literally train the muscles to respond in faster and more precise ways as the physical aspects of game play becomes more habituated. In this way, time spent engaged within a gaming experience is a resource for John’s development of skill. For him, this massive amount of time is worth the investment, since he trusts that it can only improve his future experiences, skills, and strategies.



## **John Invests Time to Construct Affinity Group and Guild Membership That Enhance His Gaming Experiences**

Many of John's long-time friendships are those that were established around gaming. In fact, three of the four groomsmen in our wedding were men that John has known for years in the context of playing. One was a friend that John met in high school with whom he would skip school and drive to a local arcade. (See "[A Morning at the Cue](#)" in Chapter 4, in which John and Jason are challenged by Isaiah to a game of *Street Fighter*.) The two others were roommates of John's during his first few years living in Atlanta, GA in his early 20s; when any of the three of them were not working they "were playing video games every single day. Every day. Every minute of every day somebody was playing a video game at that house" (Interview 4, 3.1.2012, 546-547). In the case of these friendships, games provided a socially unifying tie among John and his friends. They provided a common interest, reliable competition, and local community to learn from and with. To this day, when John meets up with these friends, the first and primary topic of conversation centers on current and past games. The time spent either playing together online or sitting side-by-side watching each other play a console game served to solidify and later rejuvenate their friendships.

On a more temporary level, investing time in a game allows John to come to join communities within guilds, or groups that form within MMO RPGs and who work together to accomplish tasks throughout the game. These guilds are important, because

...in order to compete, in order to be at a high level of play, you have to develop a kind of community, if you're gonna play online games. So you have to find people who are of like skill or somewhat close to your skill, especially if the game is going to force you to have team mates. (Interview 2, 1.9.2012, 450-452)

In games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) and *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (Bioware, 2011) players are expected to collaborate to form groups that raid dungeons or face particular monsters (often called *bosses*). There is a certain level of dependency written into these types of engagements by design. For example, John tends to play characters called *tanks*, those whose strength is physical combat; tanks can absorb a large amount of damage and deal a large amount as well. Within a raiding group, John's characters are incredibly dependent on healers, character that can restore his health, but have little physical strength of their own. The idea is that John's character goes into the thick of the action, protecting the weaker healers; in return, the healers keep John's character alive. If one does not do his or her job well, they both are endangered.

A guild provides John with a group of a variety of players and their characters with whom he can build relationships, learn to collaboratively strategize, organize events, and generally explore the possibilities within the game together. Within a guild, players tend to have similar levels of playing experience and skill. This is necessary. If a handful of players are drastically more successful than their guild mates, they are likely to leave to seek out a guild that will provide more opportunities to quest for better equipment and achievements. If a handful of players are well below the average ability in a guild, the rest of the guild may become frustrated with not being able to rely on them in raids and kick them out. As a result, in John's experience, guilds tend to naturally level out to an average common ability level.

Players often follow their guild from game to game, since they typically share the same tastes in games and come to know each other well enough to collaboratively work together. Such community-driven engagements take a large amount of time, especially

when guild members live across the globe, play around their work schedules, and tend to have strong opinions about guild-wide decisions that need to be negotiated together.

Even simply joining a guild is an arduous process. In John's most recent case, he was invited to join a guild, in response to the fact that, once he got his tank to the maximum level, his character tended to rank incredibly high in the post-game statistics. In most cases, however, players must apply to a guild, the process for which looks something like this:

If we need to expand our roster, we'll post applications. We'll say, 'We're taking applications,' and they'll literally come, and we'll say, 'We need these five criteria, and if you meet that then you can come with us and play with us on a short-term trial basis, and then we will let you know. (Interview 2, 1.9.2012, 462-465)

Players fill out applications that look much like what one might see at a job interview. In fact, an example of one guild application for *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004; <http://eolguild.org/modules.php?name=GuildApp>) includes over 30 questions, including some regarding skills that the applicant would bring to the guild, years of experience, references, and weekly availability to participate in guild activities. In light of the fact that many high-level guilds spend a massive amount of time together over the life of an online MMO RPG, which is becoming a matter of years, the selection of guild-mates is taken very seriously. As there are a range of players within a particular game, so too are there a range of guilds, some of which are particularly geared towards elite players. These guilds have quite rigorous standards, since they require players to be able to succeed at the most challenging content within a game.

### **John Invests Time to Learn From Expert Players and Opponents**

Another affordance of investing large amounts of time into games provides gamers opportunities to face a variety of opponents.

Even of *knowing* your opponents [is important]. I mean, if you play *Modern Warfare* competitively on the competitive servers, then you have to learn opponents. You learn the nuances of who the awesome opponents are, and you get to know their tricks. (Interview 4, 3.4.2012, 101-103)

John does this in several ways. He studies opponents by playing against them and watching their strategy, or what he often referred to as “reading opponents.” As he plays an especially skilled opponent, he considers the metacognitive strategies of the other player, trying to get an understanding of how he or she is organizing resources to John’s disadvantage. John then determines a way to either limit the other player’s resources or amplify his own. From this experience, John learns a) how to better compete against this specific player, b) how to compete against players like this particular one, and c) is able to adopt and adapt the high-level strategies and tactics used by either of them in the context of the competition. Such experiences multiply the return on John’s investment of time.

John further studies opponents by watching game play footage available online. As video games have grown in popularity around the globe, players have begun posting footage of their games online. As a result, John can research who the top players are for his current game of choice, locate footage online, and learn vicariously from these. Alternatively, John might spend time watching live gaming footage, which is increasingly available and much akin to watching a baseball game: the action is live, commentators narrate and make predictions, and they break for sponsors. The benefit of watching live footage, rather than cherry picked, nicely edited clips, comes down to

authenticity. Live footage allows John to see how the best players in the world deal with the everyday problems and unexpected glitches that he faces as well. For example, John often plays games with players whose goals in the game involve limiting everyone else's chance at success. John explained how he realized that he is not alone in this frustration as a result of watching live footage of a world renowned player:

The number one...player in the world right now... is HotShot GG, and you can watch him at own3d.tv almost 24 hours a day. You can watch him play. So, if you get bored, you can log in and watch him play. He's the top player in the world, and *he gets trolled!* I saw him lose three games in a row, because his team saw his name, and they threw the game just to screw with him. And so, his ranking goes down. I mean, what can he do? There's nothing he *can* do about it. He just... and it's part of the game. (Interview 2, 1.9.2012, 805-811)

From watching expert players and playing with or against strong opponents, John is able to learn valuable strategies, approaches to the game, and simply the nature of the game more fully.

### **John Invests Time to Learn With Others**

While playing against others helps John develop as a gamer, so too does playing *with* strong, like-minded, elite players. The think-scene entitled "[How to Ruin a LAN Party](#)" illustrates John in a state of flow with his long-time gaming buddy, Jason (pseudonym) as they essentially crash a *Quake* (Id Software, 1996). While the two played many games together, *Quake* (Id Software, 1996), an online first-person-shooter game, was the one that they played perhaps most intensely together. John described their gaming relationship.

*Quake* was Internet-based. We helped each other, because we all talked shit against each other: 'Hey, jump on this server. Come on in, and I'll school your ass.' That kind of stuff, just typical Internet buddies ribbing each other. It also afforded us the ability to play when we were in different cities in different states. He was in North Carolina, and I was in Georgia. Or he was in the Navy, and we

were playing. You know, that kind of stuff. We still were able to help each other's game out, because we knew we were both competitors. We both knew what our end goal was. Our end goal was the top. We're not trying to play to be mediocre players. We're playing to be the top, top, top end players. (Interview 4, 3.1.2012, 504-510)

John and Jason acted as a wetting stone for each other, in that as one improved his skill, it sharpened the other's skill as he worked to keep up with his buddy. This was made possible by a common goal of greatness and a game that collapsed the distances between them over the years. When they were able to talk online or in person, much of their conversation centered on tactics and pointers for each other, as I witnessed upon first meeting Jason. Once again, having someone to play, talk, learn, and compete with over the years adds to the time necessary for John to pursue his goals within video games.

### **John Invests Time to Research Games**

John is not just a lover of games, but is passionate about innovative new technologies, competitive strategy, and cutting edge issues in the gaming world in general. As a result, he spends many hours researching games. He researches new games that are in various stages of the publishing process, current debates and updates centered on games he is currently playing, new platforms for gaming (i.e. He read about a developer who is creating a video game for which the interface is a contact lens.), and new strategies for either his current games or genres of games in general. In addition, John reported that he does the following:

I do some research on who the top teams are, who the best players are. I read the forums, kind of lurk on the forums, see who's talking shit, so I know if they're full of it, or if they're worth a damn. Always read up on what the latest patch notes are, kind of look at the patch notes and see what changes are coming down the line, that kind of thing. (Interview 5, 4.2.2012, 135-139)

This research does what most research is designed to do: it positions John in the field of gaming as an informed participant and instructs him as to how to participate and contribute to his field most effectively.

### **John Invests Time to Maintain His Insider Status**

Taken all together the uses of time explicated above work to legitimate John as an elite gamer, at least in the genre of MMO RPGs. As an insider to this group, John is expected to have a measure of expertise related to successfully navigating characters in the game, the game's context in the larger gaming world, and the state of the community at any given moment. While these knowledge sets come from a large amount of time spent playing and researching around games, it is John's very presence in the game that argues for his insider status as well.

In completing the tasks above, John needs to spend time in the game. What is more, he is also *expected* within the game. In one interview, he shared:

If you don't have a presence in a war zone... when we went out of town to North Carolina, and I didn't get to play, I came back and one guy asked me if I had quit. I was only gone for a weekend, but because they didn't see me [in the game] and they're so used to seeing me, they were like, 'Oh, well we thought you quit....' [Laughter] The truth of the matter is, when they see me in a war zone, the percentage chance that we're gonna win is much higher. Not to say I win every match, because I definitely do not, but I win more than I lose. (Interview 5, 4.2.2012, 474-483)

In the context of this interview, the above excerpt was positioned around a question I had asked regarding evidence of dedication to the game. John's response illustrates that dedication is evidenced via presence, which is not unlike other spheres of life. Teachers assume that students with perfect attendance are dedicated to learning. Religious leaders assume that a congregant's presence at worship indicates dedication. Much in the same

way, John's attendance within the game demonstrates that he is committed to the game that he plays and the community with which he plays them.

### **John Values the Skills, Opportunities, and Longitudinal Perspectives**

#### **Resulting from Time Investments**

Upon investing resources in any domain, individuals expect something in return. The same is true with John's investment of time. What exactly he expects, however, has provided a great deal of insight into what in particular is of value to him in his gaming practices. In this section, I present findings stemming from the goals that John seeks through the practices outlined in the previous discussion and the ways in which they are of value to John.

#### **John Merges Knowledge and Instantaneous Application**

As has been previously described, John has many resources (e.g. time) and practices (e.g. collaboration with others) for constructing knowledge within his gaming community. He plays in a way that strategically results in embodied meaning (Gee, 2003/2007), in that he constructs knowledge with the mission of responding to problems and challenges in virtual worlds. He researches games. He studies opponents. He learns with capable others. As a result of these practices, John has amassed vast knowledge sets relevant to particular games, strategies, digital media, internet technologies, etc.

Playing video games, however, is less about what one knows and more about what one can do with that knowledge. Knowledge in action is the goal. [“A Morning at the Cue.”](#) a think-scene in Chapter 4, presents an example of what this looks like. In this scene, John and Jason have skipped school to play *Street Fighter* at a local pool hall. They are met by Isaiah, a self-proclaimed professional *Street Fighter* player who wanted



to take on the two boys. In this scene, John, as the first-person narrator, describes his processes of not only playing the game to the best of his ability, but also reading Isaiah, as an opponent, inferring his strategy and making judgments as to how it might be beaten. John summarized the overwhelming amount of knowledge in action is required in that scene in the following way:

You have to know how fast the character can move. How fast the character can cover. Then you have to factor into that the style of the person you're playing, whether they're aggressive and pushing forward, whether they're defensive and moving backwards, whether they're more prone to jump at you, but more prone to take a defensive stance, hit to try to get a counter hit off. You have to factor in a lot of those things. And then above that, at the very top end level of play, it's all down to centimeters. I mean, not even centimeters. It's much smaller degree of measurement of dots. Pixels are the tiny dots on your screen. Literally, there's a point at which one character can overpower the other, based completely off of how far away they are from that character. (Interview 3, 2.19.2012, 698-705).

The think-scene represents a culmination of knowledge and their application in an intense gaming challenge that John faced at a relatively young age. Moreover, John, in this case and many others, is not only taking in input from the heads-up display and applying knowledge gain from past experiences and research. He is doing so at instantaneous speeds. At nearly imperceptibly, he is observing, responding, and analyzing gaming situations. The more seamlessly these tasks can be completed, the more likely John's success will be. This is a primary goal of John's.

### **John is Opportunistic as an Elite Gamer**

John uses the instantaneous application of knowledge gained from experiences to constantly seek the potentials within a given situation or player. As described in [“A Morning at the Cue.”](#) he looks for potentials for himself within a gaming context as he reads players and strategies. Additionally, John is keenly aware of the fact that, within the

context of MMO RPGs in which games require guild and team collaboration, other players are positioned as affordances and limitations to his gaming. He talks broadly about three archetypes of players who represent affordances and/or limitations to his experiences and, for each, thoughtfully works to better position them to become affordances for their and his benefit.

**Neutralizing Trolls.** One of the most frustrating kinds of players within video games is an archetype commonly referred to as a *troll*. John describes them in this way:

They *consciously* make terrible decisions, and then they subconsciously make even worse decisions. And then, there's no filter on the Internet, you understand. So you take those people, and now add anonymity to them, and you've got the Internet. You've got people who will say things that you would never hear in real life. Nobody would ever say things that I've heard in real life as I've heard them on the Internet. You get people who are racists; they're not *really racists*. They're just there for shock value. They're Jerry Springer. It's the Jerry Springer Show. If they can shock you, that's how they entertain themselves: by shocking people. (Interview 2, 1.5.2012, 770-778)

For John, trolls play only to shock and subvert the efforts of others, including those on their teams, purposes which have little to do with the goals or strategies of the games themselves or the objectives woven throughout the game. John sees them as playing a social game where their currency is attention. By ruining their team's chances at success, berating others, or making an already difficult situation worse, these players gain attention.

Sephiroth22, in "[Death by Group Chat](#)," a think-scene in Chapter 4 centered on a solo-queue event (meaning John was not with guild-mates, but with randomly game-selected strangers), is a typical example of a troll. In this think scene, Sephiroth fails to contribute to any efforts to strategize, problem solve, or unify the group; he is simply there to exacerbate any conflict and sabotage the group. In fact, upon sharing this scene

with John for confirmation, he replied via Facebook chat, “Lol! I’m pretty sure I’ve had that guy on my team at least a dozen times.” It may help the reader to note that Sephiroth22’s first comment is berating to John, who was preparing to talk strategy. From there his comments jump from homophobic insults to inflaming the argument between Romeo and Juliet to antagonizing the newly single Romeo. As Romeo/Travis and Juliet are in the midst of breaking up, Sephiroth commented “Dude, I’m taking screen shots of this shit. Epic!” which serves only to inflame the situation. Not once does he contribute anything productive to the group, and yet he is enjoying himself immensely.

More to the point, John never responded to Sephiroth22’s comments. From the beginning, John recognized his game. Past experience has taught him that responding to, chiding, or in almost any other way responding to a troll feeds into his attention-seeking mission. Instead, John operates as though he is assuming the best and includes Sephiroth22 in his attempt to return the conversation back to strategy once Juliet has logged off. In situations like this one, which is admittedly a fictionalization which brings together several illustrative archetypes, John tends to neutralize trolls by ignoring them as much as possible and then opening up opportunities for them to participate more productively once they realize they are not going to get a rise from him. This attempt to redirect players like Sephiroth22 is a sign of maturity as a gamer, as well as an indication of social strategy to re-position a player who intentionally chooses to limit John as a potential affordance.

**Mentoring Newbies.** If an elite gamer is one who is experienced and has dedicated a lot of time to a particular game and community, then a *newbie* (also called *newb*) is the antithesis. The term comes from a colloquialism used by US troops during

the Vietnam War to refer to new recruits (Elting, Deal, & Cragg, 1984). One might have experience with other games, but unless he or she builds a certain level of skill and presence, again indicating a dedication of time, the community is likely to view him or her as a newbie, and, as with a new recruit in the military, it is a position that comes with little respect and a certain amount of hazing. The fastest way to enrage an elite player is to refer to him or her as a newbie: it flings a level of disrespect for the gamers' accomplishments and dedication within the game, regardless of how obvious they are (Interview 5, 4.2.2012).

In solo-queue situations, in which John logs into a warzone alone and is grouped with a number of random strangers to play against another team of strangers, there are many times when he works with other players who he perceives as newbies. Their gear and equipment on their character is clearly low level. They ask many questions that reveal their lack of experience. They have little actual strategy besides following the group. This can happen even in warzones that are created just for maximum level characters because there is a marked difference between a player who has thoughtfully exhausted all resources in attempting to become a great player and casual players who log on during weekends, enjoy time to become immersed in the story and battles, and eventually reaches higher levels.

John talked in one interview about the futility of getting frustrated when newbies make it impossible to win a game. I asked how he makes those experiences worthwhile.

John: When that happens, what my game plan is to educate the new players. I'll look at the different classes, and I'll say "Here's what you should do. You are a sentinel; you should give us speed right out of the gate, so you can get to the ball quickly. You, you, and you, need to hold mid no matter what. Don't chase people out of mid. Keep the middle of the field, and if anybody comes near it, mow them down.

Heather: So you're like a coach?

John: Right. So, eventually, when they don't have crappy gear and they get on a team, they know what to do the next time. So, that's my game plan.

Heather: That's very kind of you.

John: It helps *myself*. It's very *selfish*. Because I want these people not to suck the next time I see them. [Laughter] (Interview 4, 3.1.2012, 258-268)

In many ways, John takes on the role of a mentor with newbies; he coaches, he advises, and he helps them to establish basic strategies that they can build upon as they develop within the game. He went on to explain that some players appreciate this kind of support, yet others respond negatively. Regardless, such support acknowledges the potential John sees in even the greenest newbie to become an affordance in his game, if not that day, then in the near future. This coaching and advising of newbies, is represented by Juliet in “Death by Group Chat,” to whom John begins to evaluate where she is coming from in her ability, before the group collapses.

It is worth sharing that, since the official data collection phase of this study ended, John has actually acquired a small group of friends who are certainly newbies. They have attached themselves to John, who has been coaching them in exactly how they can improve their skill faster and develop a stronger character. He shared with me that this small group and he played against members of another guild in *Star Wars*. This particular guild has been known for its bragging and insults. The members of the opposing guild were chatting about how great their stats were (e.g. rankings on the server, achievements, etc.); John’s friends realized that John had many more statistics to brag about than the particular players who were boasting. They messaged him to put the other guild in their place. John opted out and continued to prepare for the game. The others continued to go on and on. Finally, one of the other players asked John about his

ranking, he stated the stats as they existed, and the other team became quiet (Interview 5, 4.2.2012).

This example illustrates John's role in modeling a kind of values and norms that he would hope for the community that he is a part of. He showed his mentees that what really matters to him in this game is not bragging rights, but results. He showed them that engaging in the back-and-forth over who's better than who is not important to him. He showed them what a certain kind of maturity looks like in the game. He did so in a way that recommends a certain type of community culture, one that is based on a high level of sportsmanship and general respect. Such a perspective suggests a longitudinal opportunism: John realizes that, while the immediate game may suffer, if he can positively support newbies' development, it is more likely that future games will be more successful and enjoyable (Interview 4, 3.1.2012). As he summarized, this kind of collaboration "makes for more variable to the game. There's a different level of depth, when you have teamwork." (Interview 4, 3.1.2012, 309-310). Supportive and collaborative game play is clearly an aspect of gaming that John values, even when working alongside of novice players.

**Harnessing Other Elites.** John seeks out other strong players in order to learn from them and with them. He works to make connections with top-end players and facilitates opportunities for them to play together. He explains the importance of playing with more capable others:

If you're playing with good players, you're going to win faster. So, just right off the bat, you're going to get to play more. In an hour of playing with good players on your team, you'll probably get in 30% or maybe 40% more games. So literally your time investment is given back to you in that sense. If you're in a good team, they are going to bridge you up. If they are already better than you are, and they've seen it done better, they'll say something like "If you did this instead of

that..." or they'll say "If you wore this item or increase this stat over that stat, you're going to see 5% more damage. Or you're going to see 5% more survivability. (Interview 4, 3.1.2012, 342-349)

The magnification of experience in competitive online RPGs is invaluable, since there is much to learn from one's own successes and failures in the event, in addition to vicariously watching an expert at work and then receiving feedback along the way.

One way that John has recently initiated more opportunities to harness the potential of other elites is by organizing cross-guild competitions on his server in *Star Wars*. During the data analysis stage of this study, he set up competitions via warzones that group players into teams to play games like "Hutball," a variation on football or soccer; "Novare Coast," a game that entails capturing turrets with projectiles that shoot at the captors' enemies; and "Voidstar," in which teams fight to access the schematics of a space ship, while the other team attempts to stop them. Cross-guild collaboration requires strong communication, organization, and goodwill across two top-level guilds who have struggled with a certain level of animosity over time. John is at the heart of this initiative and working hard to bring together the best players on the server to everyone's benefit (Personal communication, 4.30.2012).

By alternately collaborating and competing with other elite players, John is able to gain the support and challenges he needs to continue his development. On a logistical note, he has explained:

Once I hit [level] 50, I can go to these larger scale operation, which are harder, more organized combats, that required a guild to work in conjunction with one another. So, that's what I'm doing now. I'm leveling up to 50, and then I'll get some gear. I'll gear out for tanking. Then I'll go be a main tank for the guild in these operations. (Observation Debrief 1, 2.14.2012, 172-176)

John's larger plans for navigating a game developing and equipping his character, and therefore initiating quests for the gear he will require are dependent upon the opportunities he has among other elite players. These peers are the gatekeepers to the highest levels of competitive game play, which is what really matters for John about video games.

### **John Views Games Longitudinally**

John views gaming longitudinally, both backwards through the past and forward towards future possibilities. In looking back over the games that he has played and how they have influenced his development as a gamer, John was able to pin-point moments in the history of games at which, due to technological leaps or cultural acceptances of games, progress occurred that impacted the landscape of video games thereafter. The timelines in Chapter 4 illustrate the trajectory he has taken with his gaming.

In terms of looking forward, John maintains a longitudinal perspective in three specific ways: as he mentors new players just entering video games, by researching new innovations and directions of gaming, and in participating in research that argues for an additive view of video games and gamers. In a previous quote in which John talked about supporting newbies, or novice gamers, his language surprised me: after I commented that it was very kind of him to help these players, he replied, "It helps *myself*. It's very *selfish*. Because I want these people not to suck the next time I see them" (Interview 4, 3.1.2012, 267-268). The fact that John constantly considers how to recast challenges across his gaming as resources demonstrates a long-range perspective. John realizes that, if he can be a part of equipping players for the future today, they are more likely to become resources in the future. This implies a longitudinal expectation within the game.



As a technophile, John is enamored with learning more about the advancements game designers work towards. In addition, he is fascinated by the ways in which games fit into other cultures. For example, in South Korea, there are several television stations dedicated to airing video game footage featuring world-renowned players (Kaining, 2007). John explained that families sit around the TV to watch these channels much like we Americans watch a baseball game or a game show; he believes that, eventually, this practice will become increasingly common (Interview 4, 3.1.2012). In addition, we have had several conversations outside of interviews about the potentials of video games to provide models for international warfare as first-world militaries work to create unmanned aircraft and drones, the implications of which will be an important aspect of the political stage in the future (Personal Communication, 4.25.2012). Indeed, the US military has developed and is now expanding a new line of unmanned bombers, to be used in the new area of electronic warfare (Friday, 2012). John is interested in what gaming will look like in the near and distant future.

In light of that interest, John is concerned with a ubiquitous under-valuing of video games prevalent throughout schools, homes, and society. In his own past, he was belittled for his gaming by peers and discouraged by his family. He explained

“It was almost like you were practicing dark magic. I mean, kind of. The way people in the area where I grew up treated you, if you did that was almost like you were talking about something that doesn't exist” (Interview 4, 3.1.2012, 613-614).

He believes that much of that fear or disinterest came from the sheer novelty of video games, especially for those who did not play them. For the future of gaming, John is driven to join his voice to the growing number of gamers, thinkers, and researchers who argue that games matter. As a result, he chose to participate in this very study. The think-

scene “[Re-Reading John](#),” from Chapter 4 reveals the level of dedication he has brought to this study. In this think scene, I presented an account two conversations with John about a draft of “The Morning at the Cue” I had just finished. I had misinterpreted the nature of John’s experience, laying my own imagined response upon his account in an interview. As I returned the think scene to him, he was immediately vocal about the errors I made. While, in the moment, I was quite defensive about my mistake, John and I later sat down and debriefed so as to clarify the think scene and present a scenario more in line with John’s memories and experiences of the events. This kind of diligence across the data collection and member checking processes represents one way that John has committed to participating in research and representations of elite gaming which may impact the reception gamers receive in alternative communities of thought.

Taken together, John uses time as a commodity in order to develop instantaneously applicable knowledge and skills; locate potentials within trolls, newbies, and elites alike; and foster perspectives of gaming from a gaze that sweeps backwards and forwards. He could not reach an elite status without having dedicated large amounts of time within the gaming community to exert an insider positioning, gain the requisite skills and abilities to succeed at both the art and science of the game, and to demonstrate committed presence in the game. In the last section of this chapter that follows, I outline the ways in which video games offer John opportunities for greatness as a result of his dedication and accomplishments.

### **John Games to be Great**

Greatness is a goal that is incredibly important to John as an elite gamer. It is important to understand what John means by greatness before considering how games

mediate performances of it. He explained, "Well, first off, greatness is putting yourself at the very tip top of the pecking order, in terms of skill and rating" (Interview 4, 3.4.2012, 83-84). More specifically, with regards to how one reaches greatness, he continued, "So, for me greatness is analyzing what it takes to be the best, and then working tirelessly to get there" (Interview 4, 3.4.2012, 143-144). (Throughout the entirety of this dissertation, I have adopted this definition of greatness, largely because this definition presents it as a process that is an ongoing project, rather than a destination reached in one's experience.) The aspect of greatness related to "skill and rating" relates to the amount of time that John invests into particular games. Simply the mechanical facility and familiarity with nuances in the game are important to playing at high levels. In "analyzing what it takes" to set himself apart from other gamers, John thinks carefully about how to enhance the return on his investment of time. Such intrinsic desire to excel leads to initiatives such as researching pertinent peripheral texts, collaborating with other skilled players, and organizing structures and venues for high-end competition among guilds and players.

The theme of greatness immersed almost immediately in the data collection/analysis process, giving him ample opportunity to talk about and confirm this theme. Across the data, the terms *greatness* and *great* appeared a combined total of 138 times and are demonstrated as a goal of John's gaming in each of the five vignettes to varied degrees. For example, John talked at length about what it means to be great at gaming: "...so you're never going to be a great gamer if you don't play, and play, and play, and analyze what the top gamers are doing, and figure out how to do it better than them" (Interview 1, 11.3.2011, 310-312). In other instances, he talked about the inspiration found in greatness; these could be seen in his accounts of the intense level of

competition he met in the 1996 *Street Fighter II* (Capcom, 1991) World Championship tournament (Interview 2, 1.9.2012), the attraction of possibilities for greatness within games (Interview 2, 1.9.2012; Interview 4, 3.1.2012; Interview 5, 4.2.2012), and strategies for harnessing greatness by creating strategies within particular games that became widely used among other players around the world (Interview 4, 3.1.2012). In short, video games provided him with an outlet to display ability and expertise in a way that positioned him as great in his affinity groups.

This quest for greatness seems to have begun in John's childhood in a community centered on a rigid code of personal honor. "If you backed down in my town, and everybody knew it. *Everybody* knew it. And then you're backing down for the rest of your life, so there was no backing down for me" (Interview 2, 1.9.2012, 227-229). A young boy's identity within the small town where he grew up influenced his determination to compete, even if that means losing, in a way befitting certain expectations of honor among his peers and family. The implication was that John was instructed, "Don't start a fight, but be damn sure you end it," as I have heard members of his family explain it. He understandingly became aggressive and competition driven. By the time he began playing video games, a memory depicted in Chapter 4's "[In the Beginning](#)," John had learned that this could become a forum to keep track of who beat whom and to work hard to be the top dog in a particular game.

### **John's Quest for Competition Leads to Greatness**

The competition the video games provide are not merely about beating others, but also is a form of identity performance. "Without competition, all of my ability to think and react and push myself to be better than the next guy is theoretical. I sit here and I can

do nothing to prove that I am able” (Interview 5, 4.2.2012, 527-528). Everything John believes he can do is still hypothetical until he has the opportunity to enact those skills, and truly that identity of greatness, to see how close his self-assessment aligns with results. If he fails to meet his expectations of himself compared to others, he enacts his definition of greatness by “analyzing what it takes” to succeed and “work tirelessly” to boost his capacity to do so. As result, competition pushes him to greater levels of ability and accomplishments and acts as a way to mediate his identity of an elite gamer. This level of intense expectation of self in the face of competition is illustrated in “[How to Ruin a LAN Party](#)” as well as “[Morning at the Cue](#),” presented in Chapter 4 as John faces off against capable, aggressive opponents.

At the beginning of the data collection of this study, John and I became familiar with the work of Jane McGonigal, whose primary thesis is that if gamers were as good at life as they are in games, the world would be a better place. She suggests that the collaboration, the problem solving, and the hopeful heroism that occur in the best video games might be harnessed for real world initiatives to make the world a better place (McGonigal, 2011). Upon reading her work, John was taken aback by the message McGonigal implies, which is that gamers’ strength comes from the virtues espoused above. Alternatively, John explains that:

I don't get a high off of beating a dragon. It doesn't do anything for me. I get a high in the game to where I'm on the edge of losing, but I'm victorious through my skill. When you're riding that edge, then that's a well-developed game. When that game is [such that] I can barely do it, and the only reason I can do it is because of the skill that I'm using, and the skill of my teammates, then it's worth it to me. And that's, it's the small things, those small moments that make me play the game. If they didn't exist, I wouldn't play. (Interview 3, 2.19.2012, 556-561)

This statement expresses aspects of gaming that John finds most fully rewarding: the ability to do what few others can. Here and in the very connotations of the term *elite*, one can see a very limiting, hierarchical perspective towards gaming that John holds, which is vastly counter to McGonigal's representation of video games as environment rich with opportunities for utopian cooperation and an equal playing field. It is the very competition that John describes, which is not even necessarily pertaining to an opponent that provides opportunities for greatness. For him, this is the very essence of gaming. Across the data he expressed additional ways in which he disagrees with McGonigal's (2011) perspective of gaming as about goodness first and competition last.

John suggests firstly that gamers are only primarily virtuous (i.e. saving princesses, over-throwing tyrants, etc.), because games are designed to be played around a structure of honor. For example, he states that

There are no quest lines in *World of Warcraft* to where you rape and pillage a city. Those quest lines don't exist. If they did exist, *you bet your ass* people would do it, and they would do it in throngs. (Interview 3, 2.19.2012, 333-335)

When I disbelievably pushed him to backup this statement, he explained that in the *Star Wars* MMO RPG, where players must choose to play characters on the virtuous Jedi or evil Sith side of the force, the Sith outnumber Jedi 2 to 1. Upon watching John's fourth set of gaming footage, I saw that, throughout the game, moral dilemmas are interspersed throughout the story. A player's response to these situations, some of which allow innocent civilians to be killed in the name of convenience, align the character with the Light or Dark sides. If 67% of players are choosing the Dark side, according to a website dedicated to *SW:TOR* statistics (<http://swtorprogress.com/members.php>) and making ethically disturbing decisions within the game, John's claim holds validity.

Secondly, John believes that competition fosters greatness, whether locally or globally. As he put it, “[C]ompetition makes greatness. Competition makes you... it sharpens you for a greater being" (Interview 5, 4.2.2012, 519-520). It fosters an approach to learning and development that includes attempting new levels of performance and understanding and, if success is not met, then the player invests time into strategically addressing the limiting factor to try again until successful. In John’s mind, it is this process that leads to growth in direct relation to the amount of dedication one is willing to invest.

On a real-world level John sees the competition supported in video games as a way to impact the lived world. For example, the Center for Game Science at the University of Washington has created a video game called Foldit (<http://fold.it/portal/>), an online puzzle game that is leading to real-world breakthroughs in biochemistry (Cooper, et al., n.d.). Essentially, proteins can fold in an infinite number of combinations, the shape of which determines what the protein can do for the body and some of which result in diseases such as cancer and Alzheimer’s. Biochemists have been using supercomputers to consider the endless mutations of proteins that might combat these diseases with limited success. A video game was developed to invite gamers to try their hand at creatively and innovatively folding proteins and within months, an algorithm was discovered by one gamer which results in powerful implications for medical science. John posits that, based on his experiences with gamers, this breakthrough most likely was not a result of the player’s generosity or collaboration with others; it was the result of wanting to get the highest score in the game. In other words, competition was the driving force.

### **John's Quest for Greatness is Intrinsically Rewarding**

Csikzentmihalyi (1990a) has argued that "...unless a person sees learning as a meaningful challenge, the activity will not become intrinsically rewarding" (p. 129). Csikzentmihalyi (1990b) uses *intrinsically rewarding* to describe experiences that are self-satisfying, meaning that one needs no other incentive to participate in an activity that the rewards found within it. Alternately, something is extrinsically rewarding when one requires some other incentive (e.g. money, food, attention, affection) to make the activity worthwhile. John's investment in greatness is more intrinsically rewarding than extrinsically, which was revealed as he discussed the relationship between greatness and winning. He does not feel that he must be winning to engage in significant, successful gaming experiences. After describing his game play with a randomly selected group in *Star Wars*, John explained,

Generally speaking, if the rest of your team is not up to par, then you're not going to win; it doesn't matter how well you play. It can't revolve around one person. They don't build the game to be put on the shoulders of one person. (Observation Debrief 3, 3.21.2012, 371-374)

In this way, he has to be grounded when playing collaboratively and remember that the results of the game are a result of the team's success and not just his. Instead, he talked about the importance of focusing on only what he can contribute to the group: "Because, if you are nailing everything, and you know that you're doing every single thing that you could possibly do, a great player is going to impact the game no matter what" (Interview 4, 3.4.2012, 179-181). As much as the external ranking does matter to him, realizing that his game is really about his personal best indicates that greatness is a personal project rather than a primarily public display.



This is not to say that John is not interested in the overwhelming statistics that games can generate regarding players' strengths and weaknesses. Across the months of this study, he knew at any given point in time his current ranking on his server in *SW:TOR* (Bioware, 2011). An apt analogy, however, might that of a baseball player: he is likely to be concerned with his statistics regarding runs batted in and homerun numbers. At the same time, a successful player is likely to be more focused on his personal best, often setting personal goals for himself, and his value to the team (e.g. bunting just to advance a teammate to the next base). Similarly, John's interest lies in continual growth for himself and being a high-impact player for his guild. He views these statistics as a means to self-assess his personal growth as an elite gamer, which is an intrinsic reward for his investment of time and efforts.

### **John's Virtual Quest for Greatness Permeates Areas of His Lived Experiences**

In addition to John's use of video games for enjoyment, competition, and performances of greatness, he has found a level that many of the lessons and strategies he has gained through his experiences are generalizable to his lived experiences. In all of our lives, there are maxims that we hear, but cannot really appreciate until we have lived them. In John's experience, he grew up hearing mottos about the importance of dedicating oneself to a goal and about trying and trying again. It wasn't until he became deeply engrossed in the world of video games that these concepts became clear to him. "Video games taught me that in order to compete in the world, and be excellent at something, you have to devote yourself to it" (Interview 2, 1.9.2012, 174-175). As discussed above, this devotion includes time, relationships, and resources, which John never saw as worthwhile or authentic in academic experiences in his childhood and

adolescence. Over time, John has been able to generalize this level of dedication to other aspects of his life. Alternatively, such self-knowledge of what it means to him to dedicate himself to something, he can be very attuned to realizing when he simply does not value an activity enough to commit to the level of time and engagement it would demand for him to excel (Interview 4, 3.1.2012).

Another example of the interplay between John's virtual, those taking place in digitally created spaces, and real world experience, or those that engage us in the physical world, relates to self-knowledge. Gee (2007) explains self-knowledge as a critical aspect of deep learning. When individuals work to align their real world identities with idealized virtual ones within a domain, they are positioned to learn about who they are, how they relate to the kind of person they hope to be, and what capacities they have to achieve that hoped for, or *projective*, identity. This is a process of coming to not only know one's self, but to reflect upon what that self means.

John put it another way, regarding his gaming and self-knowledge: "You're competing with the yesterday version of yourself" (Interview 5, 4.2.2012, 582). While the players he surrounds himself with may come and go and while the game of choice may change, at the end of the day, John is competing with himself. His bar is set at what he has accomplished before the present moment, and he strives to continue to raise it. For one to have a precise awareness of one's own strengths, weaknesses, and processes requires a degree of self-knowledge, an aspect of good gaming that Gee (2007) regarded as incredibly important and particularly present in the midst of meaningful game play. From gaming, John has become more aware of how he learns.

As an example, John shared his strategies for learning a new game, which have been quoted above. These strategies reveal a great deal about how John learns: he benefits from hands-on trial and error as he is “running around, doing the newbie quests” to see “what I’m able to do” (Interview 2, 1.9.2012, 421). When he comes to a problem he is not equipped to solve, he reaches out to resources available online, including Google searches; YouTube walk-throughs, in which players record themselves solving difficult challenges and then share with others; and frequently-asked-question (FAQ) websites.

As a novice gamer, I found myself feeling as if I were cheating to reach out to others for solutions to problems; as a result, I spent several frustrating hours in a game simply trying to figure out how to either solve or bypass a challenge. When I finally asked John for advice, he immediately grabbed our iPad, found a reliable FAQ site for me, and I was happily moving past the problem in a matter of minutes. For him, using resources wisely is part of solving problems; this is an aspect of how he learns and manages challenges. When later I asked him how this became a part of his game play, he replied, “I am not the kind of person that wants to spend hours of my life running to every nook and cranny of a game, to figure out something that is not important to me. I don't even bother...” (Interview 2, 1.9.2012, 433-435). Such self-knowledge is incredibly valuable to realizing fulfillment and success in life (Gee, 2003/2007; 2009).

In addition to greater self-knowledge, John talked at length in one interview about the extent to which gaming has prepared him for the professional world. He noted that ways in which discrete aspects of his gaming support his professional endeavors. For example, he pointed out that “My quick thinking does translate my job. My innovative ability to adapt to a situation on the fly, it does translate” (Interview 5, 4.2.2012, 586-

587). John is currently a network engineer, the skills for which was a formative part of his gaming development and will be discussed further below. An important aspect of his job is handling stressful experiences that require multiple people to work together. He gave the following example to illustrate how his gaming supports his ability to handle such situations:

For my work. I'm a network engineer, so when problems arise and other people are freaking out, I mean literally freaking out: "Oh, no. The servers are down." It doesn't bother me. Okay, I'm really good at innovating. I'm very good at, on the spot, coming up with solutions. That's my strength. If you jump through enough hoops, you going to get in MCSC. If you jump through enough hoops, you're going to get a Masters in information technology. You *cannot* go get certified in being innovative and thinking outside the box. That's what I bring to the table. (Interview 5, 4.2.2012, 556-563)

He feels, however, that this comes easily to him after the vast amounts of time he spends in high-pressure collaborative situations in video games, such as dungeon raids, with a variety of personalities and ability levels. John believes that playing video games “keeps my mind sharper. I have to constantly innovate. I have to constantly adapt” (Interview 5, 4.2.2012, 549-550). Games have equipped him with the capacity to remain calm in the midst of confusion in order to solve problems.

### **The De-Valued Status of Games Has Led to Persistence in John’s Gaming**

In light of the benefits that games have provided John across his life, it is perhaps ironic that his initial experiences were often and harshly criticized. When he first became fascinated by the world of early-1980s console games, he was met with disapproval from many friends and family members. By the time he began learning how to create BBS systems (a mode of communication among computers before the Internet existed in its 21<sup>st</sup> century iteration), the disapproval shifted into concern. He explained:

Really, when the BBSes started up, it was kind of... it was almost cult-ish in the sense that, if you tried to explain it to somebody, they'd think you were talking about magic.... I mean, kind of. The way people in the area where I grew up treated you, if you did that. It was almost like you were talking about something that doesn't exist....And that's what intrigued me. It did exist, and it was freaking amazing. (Interview 4, 3.1.2012, 605-607 and 612-615)

This suspicion, and the resulting disinterest in coming to understand what gaming was about, positioned John as an outsider. His fascination, however, led him to continue building networks and computers.

At home his mother could not understand why the phone line was constantly occupied or how he was communicating with people in other countries. As John recalled from his childhood, "My mom used to tell me I was wasting my time on computers. 'You're wasting your time. Why are you doing that? Go outside and ride your bike or something'"(Interview 5, 4.2.2012, 616-617). She seemed to feel that, since playing video games was not something she was familiar with, John would be better served doing other things with his time.

John persisted, however, and this experience was formative to the independence and dedication that he carries with him today. He persisted partially because, in continuing to play video games against other people's advice and comfort, he clearly delineated himself from his peers and began to more fully take on the identity of a *gamer*, as opposed to someone who happens to play video games. He explained it in terms of an occult type of experience:

It was like 'What? You're connecting to other computers and doing what? That makes no sense to me. What are you talking about?' Or 'Oh, you've got *two* modems in your computer. Interesting. What the hell are you talking about?' [Laughter] I mean, at that point people didn't understand why you would have a modem. My mom was like... she would pick up the phone, and she would hear the

modem [making sounds to imitate the crackling and beeping of the modem], so she would go, "What are you doing?" (Interview 4, 3.1.2012, 606-613)

Facing this level of judgment required that John make a choice: he could rid himself of this tension or he could embrace games, knowing that he would continue to be criticized. He felt this judgment among individuals in his family, classes, and neighborhood. He obviously chose the latter option, leading to a determined affiliation with the very few gamers he came in contact with.

Across the years through discussions, I have known that John did not value school as a teenage boy. He skipped school (as in "Morning at the Cue" in Chapter 4), got into fights, refused to study, and generally spent more time playing video games than thinking about academics. As an educator, I have always wondered why someone as intelligent as John would not simply duck his head and participate in school just to enjoy the benefits of good grades in the future. As a researcher in this study, I was finally able to come to understand what school failed to offer John.

Enrolled in the gifted program, John was supposedly in the most rigorous courses his high school had to offer. However, his description of school reveals that he found little, if any, challenge worth working toward. "Anyways, school for me was really, completely, ridiculously simple. Every single class I took.... I literally fell asleep in math classes, and I would wake up and I would destroy the test. I would make 100 on the test" (Interview 2, 1.9.2012, 230-231). Throughout this chapter, I have recounted the intense motivation John finds within real, authentic challenge. Once he finds a task worthy of his dedication and focus, he is driven inwardly towards greatness. School failed to provide this for John. It seems as though, in light of the absence of meaningful challenge in

school, John was all the more desperate for an outlet for intense competition to push the limits of his abilities; video games met that need.

Indeed, John found school devoid of any interest in real excellence. "But, where I was, there was very little passion for greatness. It was mediocre. Everybody needs to be mediocre, and as long as we dumb it down to the mediocre level, then everybody goes home happy" (Interview 2, 1.9.2012, 337-339). All of his classes, as he recalled them, seemed to assume inability first and foremost, and rarely ever ability. Teachers treated him and his classmates as though the textbook was the sole purveyor of knowledge; meanwhile, there sat John, who might have led men into virtual battle the night before or written a story line for a new gaming idea he was working on at the time. John has strong analytical skills which allow him to innovate (as may be seen in an example of his game play in Chapter 6). He is capable of comprehending large amounts of information simultaneously as he navigates complex heads-up displays. (See Figure 8 for an example of a screen shot from Observation 2.)



Figure 8: Screen Shot of the Heads-Up Display in Star Wars: The Old Republic

He is a strategic text user, as he navigates multiple online resources, determines which are reliable, and uses them to meet his immediate needs. (See the above discussion of John's self-knowledge via how he learns about games.) Over the trajectory of his education, John found these strengths and affordances to be minimally relevant in classrooms that honored facts over thought. He ended this particular line of questioning in the interview with advice for the field of education: "But if the school system wants great people to come out of it, they have to be able to deal with greatness" (Interview 2, 1.9.2012, 346-347).

### **Summary of a Gaming Identity**

For John, being an elite gamer has everything to do with a quest for greatness. When he feels that a challenge (e.g. a specific video game, opponent, or problem) is worth investing time into, he dedicates himself wholeheartedly to the tasks of research, strategy, community construction, and competition. In this dedication he aligns himself with particular affinity groups, eventually internalizing the identities that come from successful participation. As he finds success within these challenges and communities, he has achieved increased levels of skill, which he has come to apply instantaneously and strategically. He seeks opportunities across games by helping others realize their potentials. As John researches and reflects upon the domain of video games writ large he views it from longitudinal perspective. By and large, it is the quest for greatness that compels John to play with such commitment and passion. In the next chapter, I will present findings relevant to the ways in which John uses games to mediate his gaming identity within nested layers of contexts and in ways that respond to and foster symbiotic flow.



## CHAPTER SIX

## FINDINGS:

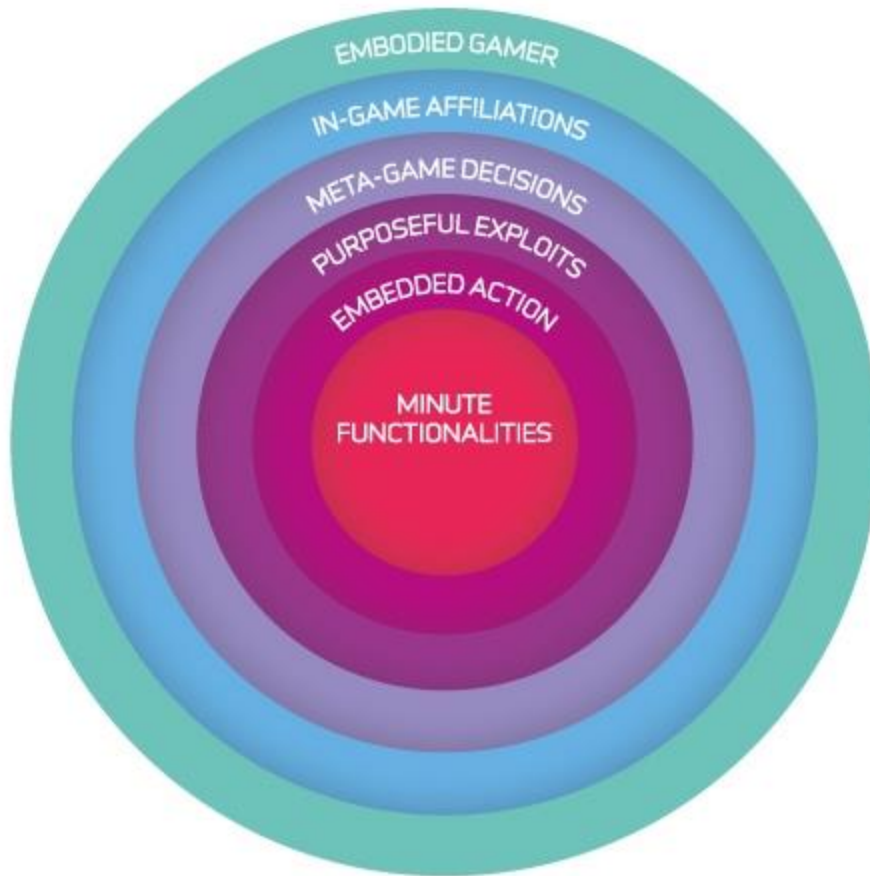
## COMPOSING PLAY IN ACTION

“There's a different level of depth, when you have team work. There's kind of a beauty to it. If everybody is flowing, it's devastating. When you have a group of people at the same time who are working in complete unison, there's a different level of power and awesomeness that comes to it. It's really poetry in motion. So, it's kind of one of those things where, it's really difficult to explain it without being in the moment and without you seeing it.” (Interview 4, 3.4.2012, 309-314)

In the previous chapter, I described John's understanding of what it means to be an elite gamer and the various ways in which he performs this identity within contexts ripe with social and individual identity work and immense enjoyment. In this chapter, I present findings most relevant to the two secondary questions guiding this study: a) What are significant moments of play for this gamer? b) What does sustained play look like for this one gamer within the context of gaming communities? Essentially, while Chapter 4 illustrates significant moments of play across John's life history and Chapter 5 primarily pertains to what it means to be an elite gamer, from John's perspective, here I describe and discuss what this particular identity looks like in action—what it does, what it affords, and what it limits for John.

The key findings that answered these two research questions include the following: a) gaming experiences are layered events in which each layer of action is situated within a larger context of a gamer's involvement in video games, ranging from immediate to historical; b) layered gaming experiences create opportunities for symbiotic flow; and c) symbiotic flow leads to significant moments of play.

This chapter begins with an explication of the *Model of Nested Transaction* (see Figure 9).



*Figure 9: Model of Nested Transaction*

In constructing this model, I took for my inspiration Lemke's (2000) organization of rhythmic pace makers, increasingly used among mediated discourse analysts (Scollon & Scollon, 2004), and the example of Neville (2005), in which he used increasingly smaller increments of time to understand all the actions and discourses engaged in landing a plane, so as to more precisely position the intersection of actor and action. I constructed a model that is helpful in organizing events within John's experiences in a way that contextualizes his use of video games as a mediational tool for identity construction and enjoyment. It was developed across the course of the data analysis phase of this study and in response to methods central to MDA. As I considered the web-like

nexus of experiences proposed by mediated discourse analysts (Jones & Norris, 2005; Scollon, 2005), I found that each action and decision John made impacted others on a different but intimately related layer of experience. The times at which John found himself playing successfully and autotelically (i.e. in self-rewarding and fulfilling ways (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990)), appeared to be those times at which the various layer were most in sync with each other. (See Table 4 for a brief summary of the model's layers.) I will outline the characteristics of each layer and then share my analysis of the ways in which this model applies to an episode of significant play in John's recent experience. I will end by analyzing the ways in which symbiotic flow weaves throughout these experiences and account for much of John's experiences of cooperative enjoyment.

Table 4: *Summary of Model of Nested Transaction*

<b>Layer within the <i>Model of Nested Transaction</i></b>	<b>Descriptors</b>
<i>Embodied Enactment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical responses to gaming (in the moment and life-style responses)</li> <li>• Adopting elite gaming practices publically denoting membership</li> </ul>
<i>In-Game Affiliations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guild membership, server participation, in-game relationships</li> <li>• Insider positioning</li> </ul>
<i>Meta-Game Decisions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-presentation via games</li> <li>• Projective identity work (Gee, 2003/2007)</li> </ul>
<i>Purposeful Exploits</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level completion</li> <li>• Events within game narrative</li> </ul>
<i>Embedded Action</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immediate fight, puzzle, dialogue, etc.</li> <li>• Game's programmed response to Minute Functionalities</li> </ul>
<i>Minute Functionalities</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trying text or speaking</li> <li>• Manipulating in-game character(s), environment, or resources via technological equipment (e.g. striking buttons, keys, mouse, etc.)</li> </ul>

### *A Model of Nested Transaction*

In coming to wonder about John's experiences playing video games, it did not take long for me to see just how many complexities there are. I was stunned by the overwhelming and artfully crafted avatars, three-dimensional virtual environments, music, voice acting, player's speech, scrolling text boxes, maps, spell icons, avatar statistics, and animation, all of which was present in any given second of observational footage of his game play. At the time of the data collection for this study, John largely played *Star Wars: The Old Republic (SW:TOR)* (Bioware, 2011), an on-line MMO RPG based on George Lucas's Star Wars franchise. His primary character at the time was Zero, a Jedi Guardian, who is a type of character commonly referred to as a *tank*, meaning he was capable of absorbing a large amount of damage. John enjoyed playing this type of character, "because it's a very high-pressure leadership position, so that works out well for me, because I don't mind it. I like it. I like being in control" (Interview 3, 2.19.2012, 53-54).

While John generated hours of gaming footage as I collected data, there were several examples of sustained, enjoyable experiences in the context of *SW:TOR*. There were also several clips in which John struggled to find the intense enjoyment and competition that he usually enjoys so effortlessly, largely in response to beginning a new game and several complications that came with it, ranging from needing to level his character to the maximum level quickly to struggling to find a reliable and competitive guild. Once he worked through these issues, he began to find his stride. For the purposes of this discussion of findings and the *Model of Nested Transactions*, I have selected a mere 2 minutes from a larger 30-minute clip that depicts John in the midst of significant

game play. Recall that John determined what moments of play were significant as he recognized that he was in a state of flow while gaming with others online. While he played and described his experience as being in a state of flow for hours, these 2 minutes are where I would like to focus the analysis, so as to deeply articulate exactly how I perceive nested transaction to have occurred, to illustrate the involvement of symbiotic flow, and to articulate one possible theory concerning the nature of significant game play and enjoyment. In what follows I will describe the discreet layers within the *Model of Nested Transaction* in preparation for an illustration of its presence within a 2 minute exemplar of John's game play.

### **Design of the Model**

For the visual representation of the *Model of Nested Transaction*, I chose a series of nested circles, with the most temporary (i.e. those which are fleeting in time) nested at the inner layer and the more permanent (i.e. those with increasingly long-lasting implications) at the outer surface. Such a view of temporal events is supported in the thought of mediated discourse analysis, as each moment of an event might be seen as existing under an umbrella of individuals' histories, identities, and understandings (Scollon, 2001). The lines separating each layer are porous, suggesting the permeable boundaries as one considers each layer and its relationship to what comes below and above. The layers are presented separately, but are intended to be read as pliable, since it can be challenging to tell precisely where one layer ends and the next begins. In addition, this model is not intended to be used as a prescriptive tool; indeed, it provides for an interpretive lens for viewing an engagement in which one item (in this case, a video

game) mediates one's identity construction in action. There is a measure of subjectivity to such interpretation as opposed to rigid classification of experience.

### **Minute Functionalities**

Minute functionalities are the discrete tasks required to physically play a given video game. They are the virtually countless presses of keys on the keyboard, clicks of the mouse, mashes of the console controls, pulls at the joystick, swipes of the touchscreen, swings of the Wii Remote, or gestures in front of the Kinect. As others watch a gamer at play, these functionalities are the observable actions that allow the gamer to manipulate the resources within the game provided by the specific gaming platform. For beginning gamers, minute functionalities are quite intentionally attended to, yet for elite gamers like John, they are so habituated (Bourdieu, 1984) that they are largely granted little active attention. One exception to this might occur when, much like in instances described in "A Morning at the Cue" (in Chapter 4), one is competing against an opponent physically present in the same room, in which case, watching his or her minute functionalities may serve to help one study and anticipate the opponents moves. When John plays at his PC, alternately, he rarely looks down to locate certain keys or fumble with the mouse, even in the midst of battle scenes in which his senses are overwhelmed with input. This layer exists at the base of the model because Minute Functionalities are the most temporally fleeting moments in the game. The duration of the click of the mouse, for example, takes a fraction of a second, and then the player has moved on to the next task. It may be helpful to imagine Minute Functionalities to be represented by the needle of a record player: it is the precise meeting of the player with its content and which allows the resulting experience to be possible.

In light of the speed-related parameters of Minute Functionalities, elite gamers tend to use gaming equipment that is as responsive and precise as possible, so as to capitalize on the twitch reflexes experienced players develop. For example, John uses a mouse that has 15 additional buttons on the sides, so that he can program them to instantaneously cast much-used abilities or attacks. His headphones present game audio in stereo, so that he can more quickly determine which direction sounds are coming from and respond more quickly. This merging of John's skill and responsive technologies used to play the game affords him a speed and responsiveness that gives him an advantage in MMO RPGs that require speed and strategy.

### **Embedded Actions**

If the minute functionality is the player's action in front of the screen, what I call *Embedded Action* might be best understood as the game's programmed response to player-created stimulus. When John hits the forward key on an X-Box controller, the *Embedded Action* is the motion of his character towards the environment directing in front of him or her. These actions are a game's symbolic answer to his physical maneuver of the controls. At this layer, players manipulate the code, which is embedded into games by the designers, in order to take steps towards goal completion. As a result, the possibilities for *Embedded Action* very much depend upon the options afforded by the game designer. For example, in my playing of *Assassin's Creed II* (Ubisoft, 2008), I found that, as my character infiltrated the cities of 15<sup>th</sup> century Italy, there were some rooftops from which I could leap and others which, due to great height, would not have been believable to jump from. Therefore the coders did not allow my character to do so, despite my convictions that this would be a great idea. Again, this layer represents

moments that are quite fleeting, yet they contain ripples across the game in terms of how digital items (e.g. avatars, environments, game-created opponents) are programmed to respond to the verbal or physical actions of the character.

It may be worth noting that *Embedded Action* may not always be intentional on the part of game developers, as in the case of *bugs*, or instances in which a game's code malfunctions and causes unexpected responses to *Minute Functionalities*. These can still be considered *Embedded Actions*, since, even if unintended, they are contingent upon the player's input to direct the character, environment, or resources into the path of one particular code or another. For benefit or loss, this is the most basic transaction between the gamer and the game. It is located just above the *Minute Functionalities* because this layer is what gives initial, most immediate meaning to the player's actions and intents.

### **Purposeful Exploits**

It may be helpful to view this layer of the game in terms of events players might say they accomplished in the game if asked by a friend. One is unlikely to describe their game in terms of buttons mashed (*Minute Functionalities*) or every step the character made (*Embedded Actions*), which are equally numerous. Nor is one likely to describe processes in their identity construction as a gamer (present in layers that are further out). Instead, one is likely to describe a gaming experience in terms of exploits regarding either the competitive or narrative aspects of the game. A gamer is likely to recount reaching a certain level, defeating a particular boss, or experiencing certain events in the storyline of the game. Enjoyment is a strong motivator within this layer of experience, since the player comes to see minute functionalities as meaningful and rewarding only within the context of the game itself.



I thoughtfully chose the term *Purposeful Exploits* to describe this layer. *Exploit* can refer simply to events and escapades that are a part of a game's competition or narrative, but it also is a verb used to articulate a certain level of using resources with both positive and negative connotations. At this layer of gaming experiences, the player has the ability to re-purpose the goals and narrative designed into the game for his or her own unique purposes. For example, as John worked his character, Zero, to level 50 in *SW:TOR*, he engaged in dialogue with non-player characters (NPCs), those characters created as a part of the game by the designers and who further the story line. In talking with them, John was given three options for responding to the information the NPCs provided. Selecting one over the other impacted what happened next. Typically, one option led the NPC to provide additional information relevant to the story, while others prompted action more quickly. John tended towards options that added depth to the plot, which fulfilled one purpose for his choice of this particular game: to enjoy a story based on a fictional world he is familiar with via movies and books. Figure 10 provides an example of what such exploits looked like for John in Observation 4.

In this instance, the player-versus-environment (i.e. mode of game play in which the player navigates a more scripted plot, rather than competing against other players) positioned Zero, John's character, so as to choose between killing innocent civilians and a more challenging task that directly engaged enemies. In Figure 10, Zero is returning to Ambassador Asara (the female NPC depicted) to report that he had effectively saved the lives of the civilians with no help from her. She begins the conversation by saying "I don't know how you did it, but you did." John/Zero was then given three options as to



*Figure 10:* Observation 4 Screen Shot: Example of a Purposeful Exploit

how to reply, each one offering experiences and information that the other two would probably not include. His choices, which can be seen in the screen shot include a) “No challenge is too great.” b) “The alternative worked.” c) “Never doubt me again.” John selected the second option, which led to a conversation about the ethical mistake that was narrowly avoided by John/Zero’s choices. Another player might be more drawn to the action-initiating choice, so as to get to the fights, and therefore level 50, faster. The affordances of the game can be exploited either way to fulfill a player’s purposes. This layer of the model of gaming experiences locates this event.

These purposes are critical, since they direct the *projective identity* work conducted in the next layer of *Meta-Game Decisions*. It is at this point at which players have a *project* in mind, which positions them for enacting a particular kind of identity as they navigate gaming environments (Gee, 2003/2007). These may be pre-determined (e.g. John’s desire to explore how the Star Wars narrative is expanded in this video game)

or they may develop as a player experiences and explore the game (e.g. John's discovery of Hut Ball, a sub-game in *SW:TOR* (Bioware, 2011) that highlights his competitive interests in games in general).

### **Meta-Game Decisions**

At this layer of gaming experience, projective identity work (Gee, 2003/2007; Gee, 2009) begins, carrying over into the next level as well. It is here that players make decisions that pinpoint the link between avatars and themselves as players determine how best to harness the affordances and limitations granted the design of their avatar in order to position themselves as individuals. This is the point at which players use avatars as an expression of the "type of player" or "type of person" they want to be perceived as. For example, in Chapter 5, I described John's desire to find ways to make every player a valuable resource to him and his gaming communities. These players, however, generally only knew John via his character, in other words *John as Zero*. As he played this particular character, he made conscious choices about the kind of history and persona he wanted for both himself and Zero, typically striving to play as someone who brings everyone up to new levels of success.

John talked about this in terms of *persona*. To do this type of work, players must make decisions regarding positionality as they select quests to pursue, bosses or dungeons to raid, secondary storylines to follow, or competitors to challenge. These decisions are critical, because they position players to occupy the times and spaces in which they will meet others with shared interests, values, skills levels and objectives (both within the game and without), essentially constructing the communities they become part of more permanently. For example, the fact that John chose to so frequently

play “Hut Ball” allowed him to a) place himself in the path of other intensely competitive players; b) have the capacity to play against and with a wide range of players so as to learn from their successes and failures; and c) sharpen and display his combat ability and strategy which will serve him well in guild-related game play. At this layer, games become a mediational tool (Vygotsky, 1987) of affinity positioning; because of the decisions made on a meta-game level, John constructs for himself a level of legitimate insider status within particular groups of gamers via his video game practices.

### **In-Game Affiliations**

John uses this merged identity of avatar and embodied self to present himself as the “kind of gamer who” is reliably capable, intensely competitive, and remarkably dedicated (as further described in Chapter 5). As a result of these presentations of self, John has occupied several affinity spaces within specific games, particular servers, his guilds, and even certain solo-que games. It is the intersection between these affinity spaces and John’s persona that defines the *In-Game Affiliations* layer of the model. The decisions he has made in the previous level all comment on who he is as a gamer on a larger level. For example, on his server, Zero/John has occupied top rankings for his class, positioning him as an expert and successful player in this genre of video games. Within his guild, named Exile, John, who was initially invited to join a pre-existing guild that was largely made up of long-time friends, has come to take on a leadership role in which he is organizing a new guild-versus-guild combat initiative. Such participation provides virtual spaces in which John may meet like-minded others with whom to continue to build competitive communities.

In many ways, this layer of John's gaming experience is incredibly important to him. When talking about his strategy for building Zero in *SW:TOR*, John explained that "To me, the build of the character is more about building my online persona and how other people view it" (Interview 5, 4.2.2012, 15). He went on to share an example of what this persona-building project looks like in action for him:

[A] guild leader was like, "You need to run with us." And I was like, "Hmmm. I don't think so." They have their reputation... They bully people and talk down to other people. Some of them are skilled PVP-ers, but they use it as a means to stroke their egos, and I don't really want to associate with those kinds of people. I said, "No, thanks." So, that decision, for me, is more of building my character than making his hair of red instead of black, you know what I mean? (Interview 5, 4.2.2012, 34-39)

Finding opportunities to enact personal values within the context of gaming is an important aspect of John's projective identity construction. Equally as important, John presents his character as one on whom others can rely on in a virtual world in which reliability is a rare quality.

And that's another part of my persona: people know that if I'm in their group, I'm going to do my best and I'm going to carry them as much as I possibly can. They are cool with that. They look forward to it... That's building my character. Because they don't know me; they don't know John Lynch. They know Zero, my Guardian tank in *Star Wars*. What they know about him is that he's geared as hell; he gets the job done. My opponents, when they see my character, they go the other direction. (Interview 5, 4.2.2012, 41-51)

Much of John's game has much to do within how he can engage within a community of gamers in ways that align him to enact sets of identities. Much of this affiliation is portrayed through actions, decisions, and discourses that illustrate John as the "type of player who" is of strong character and ability. As a result, he is positioned as an insider in particular groups, specifically a guild on his server that is not necessarily the most capable guild, but is filled with people that John feels pleased to be associated with. This

insider status granted to John by others in his gaming affiliations is not a fixed status. Instead, it is a maintained performance (Goffman, 1959/1990) as John continues playing alongside others, in that he is never finished proving his value to others or in demonstrating competence. Each new gaming instance, when John logs into the video game, he must strive to continue enacting this identity.

### **Embodied Enactment**

Much like the *Minute Functionalities* layer of gaming experiences, this last layer moves John into the lived, material aspect of game play. Unlike the first layer, however, the *Embodied Enactment* is less about doing and more about being. Essentially, this macro-layer of the model considers the transaction between gamer (both body and mind) and the mediational tool of the video game. Gee (2003/2007) describes embodied learning as incorporating not only a possible physicality in learning contexts, but also methods of inquiry, hypothesis building and testing, and analysis. In response to such engagement with problems and situations, the learner gains generalizable skills that allow them to do the same in other context and domains as well (Gee, 2008).

Some instances of *Embodied Enactment* are quite brief, such as when I notice my pulse quicken in the midst of fighting an important battle in *Diablo 3* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012) or when John celebrates a huge win so that I can hear him from across the house. These are the physiological responses to social and goal-related situations in games and range from minute flinches when the player is surprised to fits of frustration when the player struggles to find a solution to a problem in the game.

At an intermediate level, *Embodied Enactment* is closely aligned to Gee's (2003/2007) construct of embodied learning. Learning is embodied when individuals

approach a problem or domain less from an abstract direction and more from one that engages a physicality with the relevant materials, even if the materials in this case are virtual. As a result, embodied learners investigate the properties of materials at hand, hypothesize as to solutions to problems (whether general or specific problems in the domain), experiment with solutions, analyze the results of an experiment, and develop further hypotheses on which to act upon in the future. In this process, regardless of how abstract the domain, individuals learn in order to *do* something, to *act* upon the domain and the larger world in innovative and exciting ways. This is precisely what John does: given a virtual environment, he investigates, hypothesizes, experiments, and analyzes in order to learn and develop new strategies and in-game possibilities.

More relevant to a discussion of identity and gaming, the topic of this particular chapter, is how elite gamers respond to games and the affiliations developed therein by taking on life-styles that publically denote him or her as a gamer. Beyond the scope of games themselves, John takes on actions that position him as belonging to an idea of *a gamer*. He purchases top-end gaming equipment, from a mouse with 17 buttons to his high-processing PC. Topics of conversations with friends center on current games they are playing. He spends time researching technological advances that may impact the state of gaming in the future, often sharing that information via Facebook or dinner conversations. He attends gaming-specific conventions, such as E3 and BlizzCon. Essentially, John acts and reacts differently to the world around him because of the ways in which games mediate his experiences, values, understandings, and interests.

The *Embodied Enactment* layer of the model calls into question the implications of the gamer's presence in the lived world, a world that is filled with those who find joy

in games as well or distrust them to a large degree. While John finds validation within *In-Game Affiliations* (e.g. reuniting with online friends at yearly gaming conventions), at this level, his gaming identity meets the wider lived society, one which is struggling to decide what it thinks of gamers like John.

Using the *Model of Nested Transaction* enables me to tease apart important moments and spaces in John's gaming experiences without losing the contextual implications woven throughout. It additionally provides an oscillating lens through which to view the many purposes and implications in the choices he makes within and around games. To better illustrate this, I will next present moments from John's gaming footage, how this model reveals powerful nuances involved in these moments, and then articulate the ways in which symbiotic flow is an ever-present and meaningful aspect of John's play across the six layers.

### **Significant Moments of Play: A Layered Display**

Presenting video game footage in a static format presents a great many challenges. In beginning to consider possible ways to represent John's gaming experiences, the idea of presenting screen shots and written descriptions of the vivid and complex inter-mingling of multiple modalities as well as John's performance of self and enjoyment presented quite a challenge. John was especially frustrated, and rightly so. One of the key endeavors of this project is to show the potentials and possibilities for finding enactments of autotelic enjoyment (Csikzentmihalyi, 1975) and projective identity (Gee, 2003/2007) via video games. To reduce these experiences down to several still images and descriptions in the model does little justice to video games as an art or to the gamer as an innovative, collaborative player. For this reason, the reader should first



view the video footage (see the link below) before and/or while reading of the static depictions that follow. The footage presents just over two minutes of initial raw data, as well as the data layered with a voice over from the subsequent debriefing interview. I chose this particular segment of data because it presents an example of each aspect of my *Model of Nested Transaction*, rather than several examples I have observed that would require more context and a longer piece of exemplary footage. In addition, this was one of the first times that John was able to maintain his loss of consciousness while knowing he was being recorded; in other footage, he used primarily standard English, did not rib his friends as he normally would, and was generally a bit self-conscious. The debrief interview occurred the day after the footage was recorded, but following another several hours of similar game play. While here I present only two minutes of footage along with correlated screenshots, they come from approximately 5 hours of John's intense and autotelic gaming in a single night.

14 images were pulled from the footage to illustrate key moments in the event for consideration. Each screenshot represents a moment in the brief episode of significant footage of John's play of *SW:TOR* (Bioware, 2011); more specifically, he uses Zero, his level 50 Jedi Guardian to play a round of "Hut Ball." He actually modeled Zero after Superman, one of John's favorite comic book characters, in terms of appearance and physical qualities: Zero is strong and resilient. As John explained previously, it is Zero who others see and recognize and through whom John is able to enact a particular persona.

During the discussion of the footage, I use names very carefully as a way to demonstrate where I see the focus of the identity John is enacting. For example, when

talking in terms of *Minute Functionalities*, I talk directly to what John does with the gaming technologies he uses to play the game. Meanwhile, I use *Zero* to refer to the digital avatar's programmed response to John's *Minute Functionalities* and to refer to what the avatar accomplishes through John's *Purposeful Exploits*. *Zero/John* is used to express the merging of John's identity as it is presented to others as *Zero*; it emphasizes the presentation of John as a game through what others observe about *Zero*. I then use John's name again to describe the *Embodied Gamer*, the historical individual that John is and continues to become in direct response to his experiences within games.

The presented footage displays a game of "Hut Ball," a sub-game of *SW:TOR* (BioWare, 2011), which is quite separate from the narrative and objects of the larger game, but provides a space for players to compete, build abilities, and experiment with strategy. It is a game much like football in that there are two teams made up of eight players, each of which tried to run a ball into the other team's end zone. The game is won or lost after ten minutes are up and one team has more points than the other or in the case that one team scores six times before the other team. For those readers who view the footage, they can hear the roar of a virtual audience and the loud bellow of the commentator when the ball is intercepted, a pass is incomplete, or a team scores a goal.

Most important to the purposes of this study is the way in which this footage enables me to peel back the layers of John's gaming experience to locate the points at which enjoyment and social cognition converge, which I am calling symbiotic flow. Below, I present 14 key moments from the footage linked below, explaining how it fits into the *Model of Nested Transaction*, as I see it. It is important to note that there are times at which the outer layers of the model will not change from moment to moment in

the footage. For example, the *Embodied Enactment* is not at every moment changing in tandem with the Minute Functionalities, but rather it is rather consistent throughout much of a given experience. The layers are presented from the in-most Minute Functionalities to the outer layers sequentially, again, with the exception of stable layers which remain unchanged, which will be absent in subsequent tables.

It is of further import to understand two key points. First, recall that the layers are permeable and interconnected; it is not my intention to represent each layer as independent from the others. Indeed, it is this intimate connection among layers of experience that argues for the complexities of gaming practices. Second, I do not intend for the following discussion to be definitive. The *Model of Nested Transaction* is an interpretive tool leading me to findings that answer questions regarding wherein John locates significant moments of video game play. Rather than classifying his experience, I attempt only to peel apart the layers just long enough to see how they might work together and consider possible implications. I encourage the reader to view the footage via the link above in tandem with reading the description and commentary attached to critical screen shots below. To view footage, click the following link: <http://youtu.be/A9D3G7Gg-EE>.). Table 5 presents each layer of the *Model of Nested Transaction*, descriptors, and questions addressed by each particular layer, all of which may be helpful to viewers interested in tracking how this data fits within the model.

Table 5: *Questions Guiding the Model of Nested Transaction*

Layer within the <i>Model of Nested Transaction</i>	Descriptors	Questions Answers by Each Layer
Embodied Enactment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical responses to gaming (in the moment and life-style responses)</li> <li>• Adopting elite gaming practices publically denoting membership</li> </ul>	What are the lived responses to intense and consistent gaming experiences?
In-Game Affiliations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guild membership, server participation, in-game relationships</li> <li>• Insider positioning</li> </ul>	What is the nature of the player's participation in a game's communities?
Meta-Game Decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-presentation via games</li> <li>• Projective identity work (Gee, 2007)</li> </ul>	What choice is the player making that impacts how he or she and others view the avatar/player?
Purposeful Exploits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level completion</li> <li>• Events within game narrative</li> </ul>	What is the player immediately accomplishing in the game?
Embedded Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immediate fight, puzzle, dialogue, etc.</li> <li>• Game's programmed response to Minute Functionalities</li> </ul>	How has the gaming software responded to the players actions with the controls?
Minute Functionalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trying text or speaking</li> <li>• Manipulating in-game character(s), environment, or resources via technological equipment (e.g. striking buttons, keys, mouse, etc.)</li> </ul>	What is the player doing to with the gaming controls?

## Demonstration of Significant Game Play

Table 6: *Zero Prepares for Battle (0:07)*



**Minute Functionalities:** John has just initiated the recording of this footage. He types <speed us out the gate plez deleted> in the text chat. (*Deleted* is the name of a teammate.) John hits the hotkeys that cast multiple buffs (spells cast to increase statistics related to strength, speed, and abilities in preparation for combat) at one time, all while pressing the forward key to keep Zero running into invisible barrier that will soon release him into the game.

**Embedded Action:** Zero's character runs into an invisible barrier that will go down the instant the game begins. One can see and hear the graphics and sounds corresponding to the buffs players are casting on themselves and each other. Once a buff is cast, the avatar's statistics are impacted immediately and accordingly, which the player can observe and monitor.

**Purposeful Exploits:** Zero is preparing for the "Hut Ball" match, which requires each team to capture a ball and pass it through the other team's end zone. By running at the barrier, Zero can most quickly get ahead of the other players, getting him closer to the ball first.

**Meta-Game Decisions:** Playing this particular game highlights Zero/John's strengths, presenting both as capable and results-oriented. This level of preparation positions Zero/John as a serious teammate whose strategy has already begun, even before the game.

**In-Game Affiliations:** John selects MMO RGPs, such as *SW:TOR* specifically for the

player-versus-player aspect of the game that allows him to innovate and compete with others cooperatively. In this game, he is in one of the most competitive guilds on his server. Playing “Hut Ball” supports his strong, active presence in the game as a competitor and in the server as a representative of his guild. In preparing for the battle in this way, he represents both himself and his guild as a strategic, elite gamer. He clearly has experience with this particular game.

**Embodied Gamer:** By choosing to record this particular footage as data, John enters into a dialogue among both academic (as this is a dissertation study) and among his peers (as this footage may be viewed by other gamers). This is a lifestyle choice he has made so as to add his voice to educational debates about the nature of and impact of video games on players. His silence suggests a level of concentration as he prepares his character for the game.

Table 7: Zero Covers Ground Quickly (0:14)



**Minute Functionalities:** John presses the forward key, using his mouse to steer Zero up the ramp.

**Embedded Action:** Zero is the first of his group up the ramp towards the hut ball that is placed in the center of the field. His speed is due to the buffs acquired previously from a sentinel teammate and the fact that Zero was already running the moment the barrier came down. The sound of the cheering crowd and taunting of the commentator create a sense of anticipation in the game.

**Purposeful Exploits:** The game has begun, allowing Zero/John to begin accessing resources within the game that allow him to adapt the virtual environment and situation to his own purposes.

**Meta-Game Decisions:** John presents Zero/John as prepared and capable to the teammates at his side. .

Table 8: Zero Captures the Ball (0:24)



**Minute Functionalities:** John clicks the forward key on his key board and uses his mouse to navigate Zero.

**Embedded Action:** Zero has captured the ball prior to five of the other team's players reaching the middle ground of the field. The commentator announces Zero's teams' possession of the ball. Zero faces the purple line of the other teams' goal beyond the ramp in front of him.

**Purposeful Exploits:** Zero has captured the ball for his team.

**Meta-Game Decisions:** Zero/John demonstrates to his team that he is willing to take on leadership within this game by successfully strategizing to gain the ball. He is now positioned to showcase his ability to run the ball, which Zero is designed to do well because of his resistance to damage.



Table 9: Zero is Ensnared (0:38)



**Minute Functionalities:** John presses the directional keys and pans the screen to locate teammates who may be nearby.

**Embedded Action:** An opponent uses Lugian's (the avatar) ability to ensnare Zero, rendering him momentarily powerless.

**Purposeful Exploits:** Lugian, an opponent, ensnares Zero as he attempted his way towards the end zone. Zero is still in possession of the ball.

**Meta-Game Decisions:** John chooses to use the time during which Zero is helpless to determine the location of other players, so that once Zero is mobile again, he can leap away to an ally or opponent.

Table 10: *Zero Leaps to Higher Ground (0:43)*

**Minute Functionalities:** John locates an enemy on a platform directly across from where he was ensnared. He hits the hotkey, which is programmed to enable his “Enemy Leap” ability. He physically spots the opponents’ end zone.

**Embedded Action:** Zero leaps from his ensnared location across a vast distance to a platform where he attacks Starlynne. He is still getting residual damage from the previous scrimmage.

**Purposeful Exploits:** Zero escapes Lugian, deals damage to Starlynne, and still has control of the ball.

**Meta-Game Decisions:** Zero/John displays a level of maturity, since, even in the midst of overwhelming forces that are temporarily disabling, he is able to remain calm, seek out possible resources, and capitalize on them using the skills at his disposal to escape the opposition. It is important to note that Zero/John not only escapes damage, but ends up in a more advantageous position (higher and closer to the goal) than had he not been under attack. This presents Zero/John as playing at a high level of ability and strategy.

Table 11: *Zero is Snatched from the End Zone (0:58)*

**Minute Functionalities:** John speaks to his teammates “Get mid. Get mid.” [in order for his team to be in position when the ball re-sets after the anticipated point is scored.] John sees his teammates watching him from the end zone.

**Embedded Action:** Zero is unexpectedly ensnared and pulled away from the end zone. He is unable to control movements and abilities.

**Purposeful Exploits:** Zero/John is blocked from being able to score.

**Meta-Game Decisions:** Zero/John is shouting orders to his team to return to the middle of the field in anticipation for the ball to re-set as soon as a goal is scored. This indicates a persistence of strategizing. Despite the set-back of being currently ensnared, Zero/John begin targeting a teammate near the end zone, in order to pass the ball to one of them once he regains mobility. This is exactly what he does, leading to a point for his team. In doing so, he presents himself as a goal-oriented team-player who would work towards the interest of the team, rather than insisting on attempting to earn the score by himself.

Table 12: *Zero Returns to Starting Position After a Goal (1:15)*

**Minute Functionalities:** After having passed the ball to a teammate who was in the end zone, John now re-assesses the damage from the fight. He hits the hotkey that engages his healing abilities and forward directional key, while navigating Zero with his mouse.

**Embedded Action:** Zero returns to the middle of the field of battle. Some of his health points are replaced. One can hear the commentator and cheering crowd responding to the recent goal.

**Purposeful Exploits:** The ball has dropped in the middle of the field again, and both teams are vying for possession of the ball.

**Meta-Game Decisions:** In immediately moving to where he might be most useful to his team, rather than sitting to heal up or celebrate the point, Zero/John portray himself as conscientious to the needs of the team.

Table 13: *Zero Kills Paramount (1:28)*

**Minute Functionalities:** John spots the ball carrier, a member of the opposite team, navigates Zero towards her, clicking the mouse to cast several spells.

**Embedded Action:** Zero knocks Paramount, the opponents' ball carrier, into a pool of poison in the middle of the Hut Ball field. He leaps to where she falls and holds her over the poison while slashing at her with his light saber. A teammate is healing Zero in the midst of this.

**Purposeful Exploits:** Zero is attempting to regain the ball by killing Paramount.

**Meta-Game Decisions:** Zero/John, despite low health of the character, jumps into the thick of the action. He is resourceful as he uses both environmental damage (e.g. the poison) and his own abilities together to neutralize Paramount and regain control of the ball.

**In-Game Affiliations:** By running into combat with so little life and after just having proven his strategic ability, John aligns himself with his team in terms of the responsibility he takes for the larger success or failure, emphasizing his dedication to the game.

Table 14: Zero Regains the Ball and Position (1:32)



**Minute Functionalities:** John speaks to his team saying “I need a heal like a fat kid needs cake.” He navigates Zero down the middle of the field.

**Embedded Action:** Zero has regained the ball and is moving towards the opponents’ end zone again.

**Purposeful Exploits:** Zero has regained the ball for his team.

**Meta-Game Decisions:** Zero/John is immediately moving to get into position after acquiring the ball, indicating strategy. By calling upon support from healers on his team, John acknowledges the group effort needed for their collective success.

Table 15: Zero is Surrounded by Five Enemies



**Minute Functionalities:** Seeing that Zero is running out of life John says “I’m gonna have to pass it or something.” He hits the hotkeys for an area-effect stun and turns Zero with his mouse,

**Embedded Action:** Zero is taking damage from the five opponents surrounding him.

**Purposeful Exploits:** The opposing team is targeting Zero as they attempt to regain the ball. They are about to be stunned, making them less lethal. He still has the ball.

**Meta-Game Decisions:** With the responsibility of leadership, Zero/John also bring on the targeted bulk of the other team’s offense as they try to limit his ability to impact the game.

**In-Game Affiliations:** The fact that John’s opponents dedicate 5 of their 8-person team to defeat John suggests that they view him as a serious threat, and therefore experienced and skilled.

Table 16: *Zero Leaps to Ally (2:13)*

**Minute Functionalities:** John spots a) an opponent returning to the game after being killed and b) a teammate in the distance. He targets the teammate, and clicks on the “Friendly Leap” ability.

**Embedded Action:** Zero leaps to a teammate.

**Purposeful Exploits:** After being knocked off the platform in the targeted onslaught, Zero leaps to Riff, bringing him closer to the end zone.

**Meta-Game Decisions:** John strategizes here to set himself up for a goal using both opponents and teammates.

**Embodied Gamer:** Here, John is deeply engrossed and engaged in the action, as he later acknowledges the relative ease in which he was able to perceive his teammate and use her as a resource to get the ball closer to the end zone. He ascribed this increased focus as part of being in a state of flow.



Table 17: *Zero Leaps to a Foe (2:15)*

**Minute Functionalities:** John targets a newly returning opponent and clicks on the “Enemy Leap” ability.

**Embedded Action:** Zero leaps to an opponent, Paramount.

**Purposeful Exploits:** Zero leaps to Paramount and has a close visual on the end zone.

**Meta-Game Decisions and In-Game Affiliation:** Having so quickly spotted the opportunity to gain some ground, Zero/John is able to highlight his ability to think quickly and strategically.

Table 18: Zero Stuns Opponent (2:16)



**Minute Functionalities:** John selects the ability “Awe,” after selecting Paramount’s character, essentially making her immobile. He then presses the forward key and navigates with his mouse.

**Embedded Action:** Zero stuns Paramount and walks towards the end zone.

**Purposeful Exploits:** Zero/John are about to score.

Table 19: *Zero Scores a Goal (2:21)*

**Minute Functionalities:** John hits the forward button. He speaks to his group, “How do you like that shit?!”, to which a teammate replies “Love it!” laughing as well.

**Embedded Action:** Zero crosses the end zone.

**Purposeful Exploits:** Zero/John score.

**Meta-Game Decisions:** For the first time in the game, Zero/John presents himself as a true lover of this game as he celebrates with his teammates. Up until this point, his communication was primarily utilitarian and strategic. Through his laughter and momentary celebration, he reveals a playful enjoyment of the game. It is important to note that John’s celebratory taunting was shared only through group-chat, via a microphone and headset, which was inaccessible to players on the other team. The decision to celebrate via group-chat, rather than post in the text chat, which would have been readable to John’s opponents, illustrates a level of thoughtfulness; he has expressed a measure of disgust for players who insult their opponents for sport.

**In-Game Affiliations:** The teammate who responded to John is Sourdiesel, a healer whom John has played with quite regularly. This type of celebratory moment strengthens bonds in their newly forming friendship, something that is not immediately evident in the screen shot or even the footage itself, but has been an on-going relational process.

**Embodied Gamer:** John is thoroughly enjoying an instance of flow at this point. He seems to have forgotten the presence of the recording software and has lost concern for self-consciousness. He is laughing quite loudly at his desk and I can hear him from the other room.

### **Situating Meaning in Action Via a Layered Model**

Before moving to an analysis of the presence of symbiotic flow as I perceive it to weave throughout the moments of action displayed above, I will point out several critical ideas regarding the purposes of my application of the *Model of Nested Transaction* in these instances of significant game play. For many who have never played video games for themselves, the physical act of gaming may look quite passive. One only observes the gamer's responses at the Minute Functionalities, as he or she mashes buttons or keys in front of a screen, especially those gamers that play in front of a computer screen for hours on end, often moving little beside their eyes and a few fingers. Additionally, we see gamers at the level of *Embodied Enactment*, at which point the players' *gamer-hood* interacts in often indiscernible with a wider society or respond to the momentary experiences within a game as they laugh in celebration, lean forwards in concentration, or throw a mouse across the room in frustration. Viewing gamers in this light is much like peeking through a perfectly still kaleidoscope: one may see an interesting picture and have much to say about it, but the real story and purpose is missed.

Similar to a kaleidoscope, all actions are positioned within ever-shifting layers of context (Jones & Norris, 2005). Indeed, because of this moving mosaic, a kaleidoscope is difficult to definitively describe. Similarly, I do not intend for this model to be perceived or used as an instrument for definitive classification; there are many actions in the tables presented in this chapter that might belong in different layers than those in which I have chosen to position them or which may occupy multiple levels, depending on the reader's perspective. This is not the point. The point, as I conceive it, is not to replicate one moment of the kaleidoscope's turning, but to present a shifting view as I have seen it in a

particular time and space. It is not my intention to present a still shot of John as a gamer, but to make transparent the complexities are part of the transaction between a gamer and his game. Such transparency allows me to come to an understanding of the parts and processes within a minimally-observed process, with the exception of Minute Functionalities and *Embodied Enactment*. In what follows, I will explicate symbiotic flow, a theoretical framework emerging from this data, and outline the processes that weave throughout the displayed footage above as they are relevant to symbiotic flow.

### **Introducing Symbiotic Flow**

Symbiotic flow is a construct of my own creation. It is the union of situated cognition (Gee, 2003/2007) and flow theories (Csikzentmihalyi, 1975), arguing that learning, at its best, is not merely a tool for acquiring new information and experiences. Rather, from the lens of symbiotic flow, learning positions individuals to experience enjoyment and to construct or fortify important identities. I will demonstrate the ways in which these two lenses fit in mutually supportive ways to lead me to my construction of symbiotic flow. I will then continue by outlining the ways in which I see symbiotic flow in action through John's gaming experiences.

### **Embodied Learning Stems From Focused Attention.**

Gee has pointed out that meaningful learning allows us to do something, to reach a goal, to step into new domains or into existing domains at new levels of ability (Gee, 2003/2007). Learning, therefore, prepares us to participate in our world in ways that we could not previously have done, an idea which several gaming researchers have noted as starkly absent from theories of learning expressed in American schools writ large (Selfe, Mareck, & Gardiner, 2007; Williams, 2007). In acting upon the world (whether virtually

or physically) innovatively and powerfully due to such learning, more is demanded of one's attentions. In explaining the nature of one's fully focused attention in flow experiences, Csikzentmihalyi noted, "The duality of consciousness which is typical of ordinary life disappears: we no longer look at what we are doing from the outside; we become what we do" (1990, p. 128).

In light of Gee's understandings of learning, identity, and embodiment as inseparable, as we "become what we do," our attention is completely saturated with doing, being, and enacting in new ways, allowing little awareness to outside perceptions and distractions during moments of engagement within the particular domain. Perhaps more remarkable about this merging of embodied learning and identity and a depth of attention is the fact that it is strangely refreshing and invigorating, rather than tedious and exhausting. Indeed, Marie Montessori, in her numerous hours observing children learning, noted "When children participate in a task that they are highly engaged and interested in, they expend a great deal of energy and concentration, yet emerge rested and satisfied, even at a very young age" (Salovey, 1998). It is this very satisfaction that makes learning, again—at its best—autotelic.

### **Self-Forgetfulness Facilitates Projective Identity.**

The presence of attentive and embodied learning leads naturally to the idea of self-forgetfulness (Csikzentmihalyi, 1975). When one is fully attending to an activity of any sort, there is a level of self-forgetfulness, or loss of self that further denotes moments of flow. In such a state of flow, one loses concern for any aspects outside of the activity, such as time, spectators, or surrounding environments, at least to the extent that they fail to influence one's experience.

I find this to be importantly linked again to critical identity work that takes place as one learns within a domain. Gee (2003/2007; 2008; 2009) has explained this process as involved three aspects of identity: real, virtual, and projective identities. *Real-world identities* are those an individual enacts as they eat, sleep, work, play, communicate, and engage in the lived world (2003/2007, p. 49-50). Each individual has a complicated set of identities that are part of their daily lives. For example, I am a wife, mother, daughter, professor, singer, gardener, pianist, and novice gamer—and I am these things all at once. What is relevant to a particular domain, however, becomes foregrounded when one considers the *type of teacher* I am, for instance, which is, according to Gee's work (2000b) the same as my *identity as a teacher*. It considers assigning meaning and judgments about who I am as a teacher in the lived world of my classes.

Alternatively, as individuals participating within a domain, each of us is likely to hold up an ideal of what it means to be the type of person who most fully exemplifies within that domain; Gee has called this aspect of identity *virtual identity* (2003/2007, p. 62-63). It is this identity that leads one to understand a successful and complete member of the domain as dressing, talking, looking, acting, thinking, valuing, believing, and behaving in particular ways. While there are many interpretations of what it means to be an educator, to continue the example, I naturally hold to particular views of what I am to strive towards, some of which include a belief in the potential of students, values that position education and schooling as important for personal fulfillment, professional language and dress, a kind and encouraging affect with students, and a desire to continue learning for myself. These comprise the virtual identity of an educator that I have

constructed across a lifetime of being a student, growing up in a family of educators, and entering the teaching profession myself.

Where real-world and virtual identities meet, therein lies the heart of learning, according to Gee (2009). He has referred to this as *projective identity* (2003/2007, p. 50-51). It is via projective identities that individuals work to more closely align who they are in reality, with their real-world identities, to more closely fit with their constructed virtual identities within a particular domain. In my real-world, educator identity, I may struggle to live out aspect of the virtual identity I've briefly described above. When I make efforts, however, to live out what I espouse—whether by finding innovated ways to support struggling new teachers or simply to maintain active scholarship outside of my daily teaching responsibilities—I have made it my *project* to enact what I claim to value as a participant in the domain of teaching. From another perspective, I *project* my own self-hood into the idealized virtual identity, with all of my past experiences, current strengths and limitations, and hopes for the future. In more than one way, this is my *projective identity*.

Gee has argued that this three-pronged relationship of identities is critical not just to learning in general, but to video games specifically (2003/2007). In John's game play, for example, he exists in his real world identity as a gamer sitting down to a game. He brings with him all of his past gaming experiences; his values of greatness, competition, and strategy; and the various other domains of interest and importance in his life. Within the digital landscape of the game itself, John uses his character, Zero. Zero is a combination of codes, some predetermined by the game designers and some modified by John as he built the character and as he navigated the character through *SW:TOW*



(Bioware, 2011). The projective identity at work as John uses Zero to play the game might be named John/Zero.

The *project* aspect of this identity lies in several aspects. TO begin with, John chose to create Zero as a tank on the Jedi side of the force. As such, Zero is expected to be played combatively and in alignment with a traditionally high moral code. John plays him precisely in these ways: he places himself in the thick of battles (as can be seen in the footage) and will save live rather than kill as much as possible. In addition, John strives to position Zero as a character his guide can rely upon to be successful and strategic. As an example, he recounted an instance in which is logged in to play HutBall and was immediately loaded into a game that was already in progress. He was able to do this, because the Jedi side was losing so players dropped out of the game. He explained,

There were three minutes left in the game, my team was down two to nothing. Here's what happens: I run straight out. The other team had just scored. I pick up the ball. I leap to one of my players, and I score. And they're like [makes a stunned face].... My teammates were like: "LOL! We've got Zero. Win!" (Interview 4, 4.1.2012, 237-243)

These kinds of instances positioned Zero as a desirable character to have on one's team. John has worked hard to position the character in this way, since it is his vehicle for self-presentation within the game. As a result, I see presentation of competence and greatness as an aspect of John's virtual identity, which he strives to embody through Zero.

It may be interesting to point out that John has played several other characters in SW:TOR (Bioware, 2011), each of which had a somewhat different purpose and therefore goal for John. For example, when he first began to play, he created a healer, which is certainly not a character type John typically plays. He did this, however, because his guild at that time needed a high level healer. As a result, I view John's projective

identity with that character as including a quality of proving himself to his guild as willing to take on any roll that benefits the group as is needed. In addition, as he built the character, he made it a female, explaining that “usually the gear that the healers wear is cooler looking on the female characters....Plus, I always associate healers with nurses and stuff like that, so probably that plays a factor into it” (Interview, 3, 2.19.2012, 19-22). Even in the creation of this character, the projective identity that he would strive towards was forming.

I understand engagement in projective identity to be a prime location for Csikzentmihalyi’s self-forgetfulness (1990). In light of the taking-on of new identities due to engagement with virtual identities in a domain, *loss of self* may, in fact, be more literal than Csikzentmihalyi originally intended. One literally suspends full performance in his or her real-world identity in order to flexibly try on those that will lead to fuller engagement within the domain. Interestingly, but negotiating one’s own identity with one lifted up within the domain of practice, he or she begins to lose awareness of or concern for what others think about them (Csikzentmihalyi, 1975).

### **Challenge and Skill are Specific to Affinity Groups**

Important to a clear understanding of possible virtual identities within a domain are the affinity groups within them. Members of an affinity group implicitly and organically negotiate shared ideals of what membership, especially successful membership, looks like. This accounts for such commonly shared virtual identity construction, the level and nature of commitment to the domain, and viable ways in which to contribute to and critique features of membership in legitimate ways (Gee, 2009). Consider, for example, the dress, posture, or music common to members of

particular subculture-based domains, such as skaters or violinist, as well as the ways in which members demonstrate their qualifications to belong; there are often extreme levels of conformity to a particular ideal.

One of the features that play into such negotiation relates to challenges and skills expected within the domain, which Gee (2009) discussed in terms of *affordances* and *effectivities*. Affordances refer to the possibilities within a situation, while effectivities pertain to the resources one has to realize those possibilities. As individuals become increasingly skilled with effectivities, they begin to generalize to realms outside of the particular domain so that they actually begin to see the world differently through the lens of their strengths (Gee, 2009). For example, it is not uncommon for gamers who play RTS games, which require cooperative strategy creation and implementation in highly competitive time-sensitive situations, to become incredibly capable in professional settings to collaborate globally to solve problems and generate ideas (Tapscott, 2009). Gee's discussion of affordances and effectivities comments on the ways in which members of affinity groups come to take on projective identities as a part of their real-world identities over time. As they face challenges that call on particular skills and abilities within a domain, they come to view the world relative to their effectivities.

In negotiating the tensions between the affordances and limitations within a domain, Csikzentmihalyi (1975) has stressed the importance of a certain level of balance between the challenge one faces and one's ability to meet them. If a domain demands activities for which the participant is unprepared, he or she is likely to become anxious or even quit. If demands are too easy, one is likely to become bored and once again quit, since results may not seem worth the minimal effort. Both extremes limit an individual's

potential to experience flow as well as one's ability to participate successfully within the affinity group.

### **Expectation and Feedback are Social Constructs**

Related to the previous discussion of negotiation of challenges within affinity groups is an understanding of what success within a domain looks like. When one experiences flow, there is no question whether the performance is going well or poorly—feedback on success is relatively immediate and clear (Csikentmihalyi, 1975). The feedback is grounded in the participant's expectations of the experience, based in part on his or her past experience, which leads to a heightened level of self-knowledge. In a given domain, individuals have mental pattern of success or failure. “[T]he patterns are in our heads, but they become meaningful (‘right’ or ‘wrong’) only from the perspective of the workings of social groups that ‘enforce’ certain patterns as ideal norms toward which everyone in that group should orient” (Gee, 2003/2007, p. 196). One of the functions of affinity groups is to establish and monitor understandings of successful participation and contribution within the domain. In the domain of video games, for example, playing and beating a specific game is not necessarily the only feature of successful membership. Gamers in mainstream affinity groups often expect each other to critique games as they play, participate in online forums, challenge game designers by developing cheat codes, or even find ways to subvert storylines of games. These too are expectations that participants measure themselves against as they engage in the domain, yet again demonstrating the necessarily social nature of flow experiences and essentially codifying particular virtual identities.

### **Control and Critical Learning Empower Participants.**

A final aspect of flow theory stresses the importance of an individual's sense of control (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990a). This control is in part informed by one's understanding of what is to be expected, having a variety of possibilities for meeting expected phenomena, and feeling confident of success of those possibilities. Control may take the form of leaving the individual to make choices that will influence the conditions or parameters of engagement in the domain, selections of strategies or resources to draw from, or even ways to customize or personalize performance in some way. Regarding video games, some games offer players more control than others. Some lead players through a very linear, predictable storyline where the primary variable is the player's ability (e.g. *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo Creative Department; 1985)); others have virtually limitless choice as the player explores environments; choose quests to pursue; complete journeys to get particular weapons or gear; or decide who to group with, for which quests, and for how long (e.g. *EverQuest* (989 Studios, 1999)). In addition, gamers are finding ways to take on control of their gaming practices and experience by engaging in the creation of strategy guides, walkthroughs, blogs, message boards, web forums, and pod casts beyond the scope of a game itself (Johnson, 2008), each of which has a remarkably democratizing impact as the most significant of these are regularly attended to by game developers and writers themselves to get a pulse on gamers' thoughts on their games. Essentially, video games offer a variety of ways for gamers to take ownership and control of their gaming.

Interestingly, Gee's talked about control as well with respect to the importance of the critical learning that often occurs in authentic and meaningful experiences (Gee, 2009). Gee has defined *critical learning* as follows:

The learner needs to learn not only how to understand and produce meanings in a particular semiotic domain but, in addition, needs to learn how to think about the domain at a 'meta' level as a complex system of interrelated parts. The learner also needs to learn how to innovate in the domain—how to produce meanings that, while recognizable to experts in the domain, are seen as somehow novel or unpredictable. (2003/2007, p. 25).

When critical learning such as this is implemented, the participant (and even the affinity group as a whole) is no longer a passive consumer within the domain, but an active participant in continued constructions of processes, engagements, ideas, values, and identities. As such, they are capable of taking on larger positions of control within their domain, knowing that they are not only capable of performing activities successfully, but also to evaluate how participation is constructed and be a part of the creation of new directions.

I have demonstrated the ways in which flow theory (Csikzentmihalyi, 1975) and situated cognition (Gee, 2003/2007) both inform and compliment in the theoretical framing of the present study. Table 0 summarizes features of each theory as well as the ways I have merged them together in the construction of my symbiotic flow. In the context of video games, which I argue are simultaneously teaching instruments and sources of enjoyment, I find symbiotic flow to intuitively point one's attention to the larger questions in the field centered on exactly what video games do for and to us (Williams, 2007), questions which this study speaks to.

Table 20: *Summary of Flow, Situated Cognition, and Symbiotic Flow*

Csikzentmihalyi's Flow	Gee's Situated Cognition	Symbiotic Flow
Focused Attention	Embodied Learning	When learning is embodied, attention must focus fully on the task at hand.
Self-Forgetfulness	Projective Identity	Projective identities require one to break free from real-world identities, resulting in a loss-of-self.
Balance of Challenge and Skill	Affinity Groups	Affordances and limitations within a challenge are delineated within affinity groups.
Clear Expectation and Immediate Feedback	Social Construction	What is expected and how success is measured within a domain is socially constructed by its affinity group.
Control	Critical Learning	Critical learning grants heightened levels of control to participants, fostering feelings of competence.

### **Symbiotic Flow in Action**

Across the footage that comprises the data for this study, John sometimes struggled to experience flow in his gaming with others, especially as he began *SW:TOR* (Bioware, 2011), which was a game started and then abandoned by the group of gaming friends with whom John had played for years. As a result, John found himself spending a great deal of time finding and positioning himself within new guilds, watching the politics of a guild-merge, and simply mastering the game. Soon enough, however, John began to find moments of flow with greater and greater frequency, largely in response to a high level of experience in the game and to establishing relationships with other players on his server and in his guild, Exile.

The footage analyzed above came from just a 2 minute and 14 second clip of footage during which John felt that his gaming practice was in a state of optimal experience. This footage is merely an example from hours of challenging and enjoyable

game play in one evening. Interestingly, as he narrated events in the footage a day later, his conversation kept returning to both his experience of a kind of optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990a), as well as the ways in which he was reflecting carefully on the social context. After closer examination, it became clear to us both that the characteristics of symbiotic flow were in fact quite present throughout the layers of experience in key moments of game play. For example, when narrating a recorded game in which John was especially experiencing flow, he described his enjoyment of the game in terms of working within a team:

“A lot of the stuff was done, because I set it up. When I scored the first [point], that got their whole team out of position. We immediately got the ball, because their whole team was chasing me when I scored. So, because they are out of position chasing me, they are all down at their own end zone, and my team is mid, controlling the ball area. The ball resets and we get it. So it sets up a kind of domino effect. When you play in a team environment, you need people who know [strategy].” (Observation 3, 3.21.2012, 230-234)

Indeed, the intermingling of social identity building and intrinsic enjoyment seemed exactly what made John’s gaming such a valuable aspect of his life, as was described throughout the many interviews and observation debriefs. To end the chapter, I will demonstrate how, after teasing apart the layers of experience in the previous footage representations, symbiotic flow becomes an apparent thread that ties them together. I have structured each following section by beginning with a tenant the structures symbiotic flow and then proceed to illustrate the relationship I see between the tenant and the data.

### **John Must Maintain Focused Attention Due to Demands of Embodied Learning**

When learning manifests itself in physical action, the participant’s attention must be fully focused in the present moment of the experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990a; Gee,



2003/2007). Regarding the *Model of Nested Transaction*, this aspect of symbiotic flow serves as an axis that holds two poles together on a sphere in that it is primarily visible at the layers of fullest embodiment: the *Minute Functionalities* and the *Embodied Enactment*.

John described the conditions for flow as a very particular state of physical and mental being:

I have zero distractions. I don't have anything that's pressing that I have to do outside of that....I'm rested. I generally have some caffeinated drink that I've been drinking. [Laughter] And, I guess my testosterone is higher. When that happens and I'm playing, my game is probably twice as good as it normally is. I can focus in, and I do this tunnel vision thing, where my brain ignores the rest of anything that doesn't have to do with me playing video games. Like, people could be talking behind me, and I don't hear it. An explosion could go off down the street; I don't pay attention to it. Nothing, *nothing* interferes with my focus on the game, because, when I'm at my best, I'm pretty good, but at the expense of everything else. (Interview 1, 11.3.2011, 372-384).

Drawing a direct link between his physical positioning as he sits at the computer, he points out that certain embodied conditions, such as being rested and caffeinated, provide optional conditions for flow. This initial condition of being as he sits down to a game seems to be a necessary point of entry into a heightened sense of enjoyment.

He recognizes when he is becoming positioned for flow because there seems to be a more direct connection between his physical state of readiness and the extent to which he is capable mentally:

My actions are sharper. I can predict my opponents' moves steps before they are doing them. I know what they're going to do. I read them. My eyes don't miss a thing on the heads-up display, the game interface. I don't miss anything. I don't make mental errors that cost me, you know, kills or deaths or resources. It all seems to unfold exactly like I plan it. It's not like fate makes it do like that; it's just when I'm on, it unfolds exactly like I want it to unfold, regardless of what my opponent wants to happen. I know what his best is and I know that my best can beat it....It's pretty exhilarating. (Int.1, 11.3.2011, 386-393)

This description comes from our first interview in November of 2011. The footage under analysis was recorded four months later. Between these two points in time, John talked quite a bit with me about a kind of transcendent feeling-- he simply becomes his best self, that is a self that is competent, innovative, collaborative, and artful, in these moments of flow, where the gaming equipment and mechanics of the game almost seem a part of him and he is able to, with a sweep of the eyes or sometimes even just a hunch, take in a huge amount of information instantaneously and react “almost without thinking” (Interview 3, 2.19.2012, 709). Such comments harken to the hundreds of participants in Csikzentmihalyi’s (1975) study, some of them chess masters, surgeons, and mountain climbers, each of whom talked about a heightened sense of presence in the moment.

One can observe this level of focus and state of being fully in the moment during the “Hut Ball” game above. The moment portrayed in Table 17 (beginning at time marker 2:15), for example, is quite an important instance in this footage, primarily because of the level of keen awareness required by John to accomplish his objective. In the debrief interview related to this footage, John explained that, even after having just been surrounded by enemies, he was considering the best position for him to place Zero to ensure a score. He remembered in the game that several opponents had recently died in scrimmage in the middle of the battle, but there was one more who died later in the fight.

“So the whole time, I was waiting around for one of their guys that we killed to be ready to res [short for *resurrect*], so I got them out of position and scored. To be able to do that, you have to be able to keep track of who’s alive, who’s dead, who’s got what... (Observation Debrief 3.22.2012, 202-205).

In keeping such a precise mental record of which characters are dead or alive and tracking them on his map, he was able to accurately predict when an opponent should be returning to the field of battle, the entry point at which is John’s targeted end zone. This

was directly where John needed to get the ball, so he was able to direct Zero, within a matter of a few seconds, to escape a group of five opponents who targeted him, leap to a friend, leap to an enemy, and score (beginning at time marker 1:58).

The pathway of embodiment seems to run from John, the physical body at the screen, through to the virtual representation of him in the game, to Zero, and then back into the body as John reacts to his success. Along this path, John is able to enact spontaneous strategies and innovate on traditional ways of solving problems in the game when he is in this heightened level of focus using the constructs of the game as a way of virtually inhabiting the gaming space. He actually does this with the controls (at the *Minute Functionalities*) what he might otherwise do with his hands: explore the possibilities provided within the environment and within himself by trial and error. Indeed it is this ability that makes video games unique: to manipulate what would otherwise be a purely abstract content in a way that incorporates visual, gestural, and audio input, thereby replicating the physical act of manipulating and exploring items. The arch moves back away from the game into John as these types of experiences shape John's strategy and skill in future games, as well as the ways in which he views the world outside of video games. Because our knowledge, beliefs, values, and behaviors are shaped by the domains in which we participate regularly (Gee, 2003/2007), it makes sense that how John uses Zero will impact who John becomes, or continues to become, through the identity work embedded in gaming.

It seems that this understanding of where John fits in the gaming transaction locates a point at which an elite gamer might differ from other kinds of players, although additional research is needed to confirm this. Because John has such facility with the

physical mechanics of the game, (e.g. twitch reflexes with controls, efficiently attends to the heads-up display, and quick typing in the midst of battle) his *Minute Functionalities* limit the kinds of glitches and frustrations a less experienced player might experience. In addition, the confidence he has in his abilities due to his *Embodied Gamer* identity as an elite, dedicated, and successful player is more likely to help him continue to persist in situations that demand excellence, compared to less experienced gamers. It is here that the investment of time resources pay off for John as an elite gamer.

Taken together, this phenomenon supports Gee's (2007) description of embodied learning: video games provide the capacity of the player to inquire, build hypothesis, test them, and analyze the results. John realized that an opponent would walk across that ramp soon, prepared by placing himself within targeting range by jumping to the friend, and leapt to see whether this would work as planned. It did.

### **John Loses and Re-Creates Self in Projective Identity**

Projective identities require one to break free of embodied identities, providing space for what Csikzentmihalyi (1975) describes as a *loss of self-consciousness*. Without delving into the nature of self-hood (a discussion beyond the scope of the present study), I draw from Csikzentmihalyi's (1990a) description, stating "Loss of self-consciousness does not involve a loss of self, and certainly not a loss of consciousness, but rather, only a loss of the *consciousness of the self*. What slips below the threshold of awareness is the concept of self, the information we use to represent to ourselves who we are" (p. 64). Essentially, attention is so fully occupied that one is unable to be concerned with the appearance or implications of an action.

John often becomes deeply engrossed in video games. As he put it previously, he often feels as if he is in his own world as he finds himself immersed in a video game (Interview 1, 11.3.2012). He is no longer John Lynch; he is Zero/John. The nature of the projective identity allows John to take on the affordances and limitations of both Zero and himself simultaneously. Where Zero is limited (e.g. Zero's lack of speed), John is able to balance the limitation with the affordances he carries within his personality (e.g. strategy in running towards the soon-to-be-released barrier in Table 1 or working with teammates to get speed boosts), as well as with the knowledge and skills he has developed over a life-time of gaming. This allows him to build upon personal strengths, such as the confidence, strategy, leadership, and pragmatism that he carries with him as individual.

John's awareness of the importance of this identity work within the context of the game is a measure of a maturity and experience he brings to his game. Even from the first moments of playing a new game, as he builds a character, he considers the implications of all the many character-building choices he makes, to consider how they will represent him as a player into the future. To a larger degree, John strives to evoke a persona that presents him as a self-reliant strategist and a reliable, capable game-changer (from Interview 5, 4.2.2012).

The extent to which John experiences this loss of self-consciousness in the midst of his persona building is apparent throughout the footage of the "Hut Ball" game, particularly at several levels of the model. At the Personal Exploits layer, he uses the game to accomplish particular tasks. This is especially important to John who, over his adolescence and early adulthood has enjoyed playing sports (i.e., football, basketball,

soccer, baseball, and several martial arts), but due to limitations resulting from several injuries, is unable to play any longer. The virtual embodiment of games like “Hut Ball” appeal to the competitiveness and strategy that he developed through sports during his youth, but can no longer enact physically. John is able to shed the physical limitations as he shares identity with this virtual athlete.

At the levels of *Meta-Game Decisions* and *In-Game Affiliations*, John gives a great deal of consideration to how he chooses to position himself within larger communities via the choices to act in particular ways and his success in doing so. When John is in a state of flow, however, the decisions that lead him to successfully position himself within multiple communities at one time become unconscious, and a part of simply playing the best game that he can. For instance, Table 6 (beginning at time mark 0:56) represents a moment at which John was about to score a point for his team, but an opponent stopped him and actually drew him away from the end zone. At that time, John immediately targeted a teammate to whom he would throw the ball upon regaining mobility and spoke to his team via group-chat, saying “Get mid. Get mid,” (Observation, 3.21.2012) which directed them to prepare for the ball to be reset once the point is scored. This split-second pair of choices provided an opportunity to perform the targeted identities for John’s group, presenting Zero/John as a capable, strategic team player on whom they can rely to put the group’s interests before concern about his own ego. In this way, John is able to perform an identity that is a blend of the virtual Zero and the embodied John in order to impact other’s perceptions and judgments of him.

It is important to note that Gee’s (2009) description of projective identity suggests a measure of boundlessness in ones options for enacting identity. As some researchers,

such as Jenkins (2004), have pointed out, the narrative of a video game has ways of limiting the options one truly has, as particular possibilities may simply have not been written into the game design. This is less true for games referred to as *sandboxes*, in which the game designers merely equip the player with environments, avatars, and resources, while the game play options are widely up to the player. *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), is considered a sandbox, in that, while there are story lines one might follow, which allow for more one-sized-fits-all possibilities, one might also choose to travel the continents of the game collecting pets, haggle for goods at the auction house, or virtually loiter with friends in a village square. Regardless, the script of a game does, in fact, have a degree of control over the projective possibilities for a player/character.

A mediated discourse analysis might argue, however, that this is true of all spaces, each of which is wrought with various scripts for particular affordances and limitations on one's behavior (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). For example, upon entering a library, one is likely to understand a particular set of norms that the space (and time of occupation of that space) dictates. One is likely to speak quietly, locate texts of interest, or sit down to study. One can certainly subvert such norms, but even that is a choice among a list of possible scripts. Within a particular space, an individual's facility with accommodating the normative scripts to his or her purposes is a sign of insider status among those who occupy such spaces.

This is true of video games as well. While certainly, there are aspects of a game itself that may limit John's ability to construct innovative projective identities, they are necessarily a part of the domain itself. It is a measure of John's expertise that he is so

surely and consistently able to adapt gaming situations, characters, and narratives to his own larger purposes. As a result, much of the projective work he performs here has to do with harnessing resources most effectively to enact personal and persona-specific goals. This is true of experts in all domains (Gee, 2003/2007).

### **John's Success and Feedback are Socially Determined**

While John has the capacity to influence the ways in which his community affiliations view him, he is also impacted by the collective knowledge sets, skills, values, and beliefs of those with whom he associates, especially when it comes to what counts as success in his game. Being keenly aware of various archetypes of players common to MMOs, John quite judiciously selects his acquaintances. In selecting a guild to affiliate with, John has had to choose among two high-end guilds on his particular server, both of which have extended invitations for him to join. As described previously in this chapter, he has chosen to associate with Exile, rather than a group that is known across the entire server for taunting opponents who are clearly, from John's perspective, of lower experience or gear-levels, dropping out of games when they begin to lose, or focusing primarily on their personal statistics, levels, and egos (from Interview 5, 4.2.2012).

When comparing a guild such as the one John turned down to Exile, a group of players who are generally as capable but more interested in collaborating and building community as they reach their individual accomplishments, the primary difference I noticed seemed to center around definitions of success, and therefore the purposes for which they play this game. For members of Exile, the purpose of the game seems primarily focused on doing one's best; for members of the other guild, at least as John viewed them, the primary goal seems more focused on individual performances of ability,



sometimes by belittling the efforts or abilities of opponents. Indeed, members of Exile, like John, tend to generally appreciate greatness within the game, even when that greatness is an opponent. As John explained it, greatness in opponents tends to make gaming experiences more meaningful:

It's because you get better, when you can count on them to be tough to beat. You want it more, and when you wanted more, it's easier to enter flow. When you don't have any care about it, then it's very difficult to get into that zone, you know what I mean? So, it's like if I can win with my eyes closed, there is no flow. There's nothing to it. It's boring. It doesn't even make me want to keep doing it. I'm appreciative when I get up against good players. (Interview 4, 3.1.2012, 156-160)

Such an appreciation of challenging opponents highlights the fact that, for John and many of those with whom he chooses to closely align himself, the purpose of playing a given video game is to reach new levels of ability and enjoyment. These are the measures of John's success, which he chooses to enact collaboratively through his thoughtful alliances as well as his conduct within games.

A player positioning him or herself from either of these two purposes due to the *In-Game Affiliations* they bring to a given instance is playing for different purposes at the Meta-Game Decision level than a player from another perspective. In Table 19, for example, John celebrates his innovative score by yelling and laughing into his group-chat mic, "How do you like that shit?!" (Observation, 3.21.2012). This kind of cheering affords Zero/John to build upon a newly established friendship with a particular player in the game, Sourdiesel, who laughs, "I love it!" (Observation, 3.21.2012). It gives him a chance to share his excitement with his team and celebrate a job well done. This type of banter, in contrast, could be quite offensive to the other team; however, John intentionally used group-chat, rather than another platform, primarily because it is not accessible to

anyone outside of the team. As a result, he has conducted himself with a high level of sportsmanship, while still acknowledging a great play, which boosts the energy of the team in later footage. Here, he has succeeded not only at playing the game itself well (e.g. scoring the point), but also playing it socially well, based on the affinity norms.

### **John Meets New Challenges with Increased Skill and Community**

When participating in a domain within a group, the gap between an individual's current ability and the challenge at hand can be closed through collaboration.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975; 1990a) has stressed throughout his work the importance of a delicate relationship between the challenge one faces and one's ability level. If a challenge is too easy, individuals become bored. If a challenge is too difficult, individuals become anxious. In either case, they are unlikely to succeed in meeting the challenge or reach a state of optimal experience, or flow. However, when groups of individual are met with a difficult challenge, they use knowledge, skills, experiences, and texts dispersed across the group to succeed (Gee, 2003/2007). In this way, an affinity group is able to not only meet a challenge, but then begin to innovate in how they do so, combining resources in ways that make the challenge innocuous.

In "Hut Ball," for example, the designers include environmental challenges such as areas of the field that burst into flames and a rectangular poison pit. When a character has possession of the ball, his or her speed is reduced, making it easier for opponents to catch up and deal damage. A beam of light shines over any character with ball possession as a beacon to friends and also foes to spot and locate him or her, making hiding or sneaking impossible. In addition, the fact that John's eight-man team is playing against eight other humans makes "Hut Ball" very different than player-versus-environment zones in *SW:TOR* (Bioware, 2011), which adds to the challenge as well. This aspect of the game, the collaborative challenge, is an aspect of player-versus-player (PVP) content that John loves about MMOs (Interview 4, 3.1.2012).

The fact that the variations in opponents and allies are such a critical component of this game exposes elite gamers to a wide range of strategies and tactics, building their own

repertoires. In fact, “Hut Ball” is an example of content commonly referred to as an arena game, in that, much like chess or basketball, the field remains the same regardless of how many times you play; the difference from game to game is only the players. Unlike chess and basketball, however, not only opponents change, but so do players’ resources, since the group of individuals upon whom they must rely are selected at random (with the exception of a maximum of two selected teammates by a given player).

Some of John’s most long-term friendships have resulted from initially collaboratively competitive beginnings. Jason, a friend of John’s since high school began as a friend with whom John played *Street Fighter* (Capcom, 1991). Over the years they have continued to play games, some escapades of which are illustrated in Chapter 4. While they formed their own support community for each other in a town in which few people played video games seriously, they were intensely competitive, constantly vying for bragging rights between the two of them (Interview 4, 3.4.2012).

Within their relationship, and across many others that John has formed and maintained via MMO games, there came to be a higher expectation of each other than merely winning the game. When listening to John talk about multiple exploits with guilds or with Jason across almost all of our interviews, it became apparent that, in response to the intense “sharpening” of each other’s skills, winning a game was just the starting point of their real games, as was leveling up to maximum level. If the game can be won, they seemed to take a simple victory for granted. Instead, the stories that he and his friends retell and rib each other about are the ones which resulted in innovative, efficient, and decisive wins, usually in collaboration with other capable players. These elements

comprise many of the experiences described in chapter four of this study and dozens of stories relayed through interviews.

The ways in which John's challenge within "Hut Ball" is overlaid with an additional challenge to innovate and use resources efficiently to affect a decisive win plays out in the example footage, especially as depicted in Table 18. One aspect of winning "Hut Ball" is time related: players have ten minutes to win before time runs out. For John, it is not enough to win, since that is a challenge that is typically easy for him. Instead, he adapts his view of the game to win decisively, meaning efficiently acquiring as many points as possible. As a result, efficiency is part of the challenge for him. Zero, in Table 13, needs to get the ball from Paramount. While Zero does not deal a relatively strong amount of damage on his own, John has figured out a way to use environmental features of the field (e.g. the poison pit) in combination with his abilities and used his character's striking ability to most quickly kill Paramount, thereby gaining possession of the ball. Essentially, the nature of John's individual challenge, which is in response to the communities he affiliates with, impacts the ways in which he uses affordances and limitations in his game play.

This concept is visible throughout the layers of experience pertaining to *Purposeful Exploits* and *Meta-Game Decisions* as he accomplishes design-dictated actions (e.g. kill an opponent to take the ball from her) all while re-purposing affordances to meet his personal goals within the game (e.g. using the poison to more rapidly kill the opponent and get the ball). By re-purposing, I mean that he is taking an otherwise take-for-granted resource and adapting it to a new, innovative purpose. This concept also aligns John with other avid, elite gamers who view a casual win as expected and

innovation, efficiency, and undeniable victory as added goals to ascribe to. It can even be seen in John as an *Embodied Gamer*, since it is at this level that he is physically laughing and leaning towards the screen in deep focus and enjoyment, especially since his strategy was so successful across this game.

### **Control, Competence, and Enjoyment Lead to John's Critical Learning**

Csikszentmihalyi (1990a) has described flow experiences as requiring a high level of control in the participant over his or her own performance, regardless of occurrences beyond his or her sphere of influence. This control nurtures a sense of competence, of greatness, as I see it. Since humans enjoy that which they are good at, they are likely to engage in the activity more, returning us back to the idea of time as a commodity in autotelic experiences in general and in video games more specifically. With experience comes opportunity for acquiring expertise (Gee, 2003/2007). The presence of control, competence, and flow are precisely that which leads John to moments of greatness in his gaming life.

“[Flow] is kind of like a state of euphoria, when everything you do is measured and perfect” (Interview 5, 4.2.2012, 331). In this concise description, John summarizes the significant presences of control in these experiences. Due to the high level of attention and ability to assess a situation, he is able to make *twitch*, or lightning quick, decisions, which, when in flow, are almost always exactly what resulted in catapulting John (and his team) to high levels of success.

The competence that Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1990a) has described differs from this description of John's experiences, primarily due to its merging with situated cognition theory. From this stance, competence relates to a successful performance not of

the task at hand, but of identity performance as *the type of person who does this fantastically well*. This is not to say an audience is necessary for one to reach a level of flow; what makes this performance so rewarding is largely precisely because it provides a proving ground to one's self, as was discussed in Chapter 5's discussion of greatness.

This level of enjoyment is incredibly motivating and self-confirming for John. As a result, he plays more and through playing more has increased opportunities to learn from other players, his own successes and mistakes, and the game itself. Upon being asked about his ability to so confidently make decisions within games when he is in flow, John explained that "It comes through everything. It comes through experience mostly, playing with the same people over and over again; you can tell there's a pattern" (Interview 5, 4.2.2012, 93-94). In short, his ability to be in such control of his decisions stems from the level of experience that he has built up over time.

Tables 15-19 show John escaping a larger group of opponents who were targeting him, dropping down to a position that gave him time to wait for an enemy to resurrect, leaping to a friend, leaping to the newly resurrected enemy, and scoring—all of which took just at thirty seconds to complete. The confluence of control, competence, and enjoyment is woven throughout the moments at all layers of the experience model. At the most discrete level, that of *Minute Functionalities*, John's ability to locate and calculate positions of all eight enemies and seven teammate and his ability to instantaneously adapt his plan to the unexpected successfully illustrate a heightened sense of focused attention, granting him complete control of Zero at the *Embedded Action* layer. This led to completion of the predictable *Purposeful Exploits* built into the game's mechanics, but also allowed John to position his character/himself in such a way as to enact the values of

innovation, efficiency, and decisive success that is so highly regarded by himself, his guild, and his friend, Sourdiesel who was with him in this game. As a successful performance of identity as an avid, elite gamer at the *Meta-Game Decision* layer, he participated within the *In-Game Affiliations* layer successfully as well. All of this led to John, as the *Embodied Enactment* layer, having nothing short of a great time. A few seconds after the selected footage shuts off, John shouted to his team in the group-chat mic, "I love this fucking game!" (Observation 3, 3.21.2012). This statement reflects not only the amount of enjoyment John enjoyed in the flow of this game, but also provides a reminder of the intense loss-of-self that is a part of such deep, embodied engagement. In previous recordings of footage, where John was struggling to reach flow-like engagements, his language was always quite standard, with limited if any cussing. I attribute this fact to John's embodied awareness of being recorded and wanting to represent himself and me well to an academic audience. I intentionally chose the moment of flow presented in the hyperlink and tables because it was the first in which John was able to lose himself so deeply in the game as to completely forget to monitor his language, but instead celebrated his enjoyment in authentic language. His presence at the *Embodied Enactment* level differed here than at the beginning of the game.

From this intense moment within *SW:TOR* (Bioware, 2011), John is learning quite a bit. He is adding new strategies to his repertoire. He is gaining positive feedback from a new approach to innovating tactics in his play. He is hypothesizing, enacting, and evaluating choices he must make across events and in response to others. More importantly, he is confirming self-knowledge that his is indeed a successful strategist and player. He is translating personal theory into action and is pleased with the results.

### Summary of Gaming in Symbiotic Flow

John's game play can best be described using a model that both teases apart the layers within the nexus of his experience (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) and emphasizes the permeable nature across layers. The *Model of Nested Transaction* does just that, providing language useful in navigating analysis and discussion around such experiences. In this particular case, the model allows me to illustrate the critical role that symbiotic flow plays in John's gaming practices. While there is certainly an individual project occurring in John's game play, he plays with and among other from whom he learns, develops, and excels as a gamer. He is able to enter into, and at times almost construct, optimal experiences that push him to greater levels of achievement.

Taken together, I have explicated several key findings in this chapter. John maintains intense levels of attention in response to the demanding nature of embodied learning. He loses and re-creates self via practices that construct projective identity. His success and feedback thereof are linked to affinity expectations. He meets new challenge not only with increased skill, but with affinity groups with dispersed expertise and experiences. Lastly, control, competence, and enjoyment are defining factors in John's game play. In the final chapter, I will pull together key finding from this and previous chapters, illustrating that ways in which they fit together around a metaphor of gaming as composing.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### IMPLICATIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY

There is nothing new in insisting that video games matter, at least not in the world of gamers. Throughout the months it took to collect data and write this document, many people have asked me what my research is about, including the adolescents I tutored, friends from various aspects of my world, professors I've met at conferences, and my family at Sunday dinners. It has been striking to see people's responses to the idea of a study that investigates what games mean to an individual and how he uses them. Many people respond with furrowed brows or respond like one gentleman who followed up with "Ah, so you're going to show how bad games are for kids?! That's great. Someone needs to say it officially." When I ask whether these individuals have ever played a video game, the response is "No," often with the same tone of voice one might use if asked if they've ever had lice. For those who are gamers themselves, to whatever degree, the look in their eyes is of disbelief, asking, as did one friend "You can write about that stuff? They'll let you?" Upon sharing my key findings with a friend at a bookstore, who is himself an avid gamer, he was just about bubbling by the time I finished the two minute summary. "Yes. Yes! That's exactly it!" For anyone who has ever dedicated time and energy to video games, it is no secret that something powerful is happening.

This study has addressed questions that are critical to understand more fully what that something is. Put another way I have spoken to why video games matter to an elite player, as well as what games do for and to him (Williams, 2007). The over-arching question guiding my inquiry has asked What does it mean to be an elite gamer? Through

addressing this and the accompanying sub-questions, I have come to see the immense complexity of gaming and learning through John's experiences and accounts.

In this concluding chapter, I will synthesize the larger understandings I draw from this work, reflect upon the impact of this work for John and for myself, and consider the implications for wider discussions in the field of language and literacy education. This chapter ends with John's voice as he has a final chance to speak directly to the reader as to why video games matter.

### **Synthesis of Lessons Learned from an Elite Gamer**

The present study has used mediated discourse analysis and case study methods to answer the following question: What does it mean to be an elite gamer, to one life-long player of video games? In addition, the following sub-questions were considered: a) What aspects of elite gaming are important and meaningful to one particular gamer? b) What moments of play does this gamer identify as significant? c) What does sustained play look like for one him? These questions allowed me to learn much about not only the nature of elite gaming and its implications for learning and literacy, but also about John and myself as individuals. I begin this concluding chapter by addressing conclusions gleaned from the findings, discuss implications thereof, and then transition into closing reflections.

### **In-School and Out-of-School Tensions**

In many ways, when considering what elite gaming has meant to John over much of his life history, a theme emerges that largely challenges traditional notions of schooling and learning practices. To begin with, John represents a pre-cursor to the current in-school and out-of-school tensions related to literacy and learning. As a gamer

who has and continues to strive for greatness, he has found relevance, meaning, and knowledge in spheres largely outside of the context of traditional sources of education. For example, in Chapter 5, he talked extensively about the reading he engaged in (and continues to engage in) that has enabled his gaming endeavors. From reading *The Art of War* (Tzu, 2005), an ancient text on strategic warfare, to lurking on message boards, to watching live gaming events online, John integrates a broad range of texts and reading practices to equip him for navigating games with a high level of expertise. Within games, John engages in various forms of literacy as he *reads* opponents, decoding his opponents' tactics, inferring the opponents' meta-strategies, and simultaneously adapting his strategies to make the most of the affordances he has within the game. As I illustrate in the think scene "A Morning at the Cue," when John and Isaiah pushed each other to the edge of their ability, John engages in such literacy in the midst of a competitive and significant moment of gaming. Even simply navigating the heads-up display, which the reader has viewed through the footage in Chapter 6, John is constantly engaging with text that demands him to incorporate a constant barrage of image, print, audio, gesture, and speech while simultaneously problem solving and navigating the game.

I have been astonished throughout the collection and analysis of his footage by not only the quantity and speed of the information John must process at any given moment of game play, but also the ease with which he navigates it all. My observations have led me to consider how much of this skill is quite inapplicable or relevant to the content and methods of teaching I have witnessed in the public classrooms. While educators talk frequently about preparing learners for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, modes of instruction tend not to differ from those used before the rise of web technologies. This

disconnect frustrates those students who intrinsically feel the irrelevance of in-school structures to the vital and critical out-of-school practices in which they already engage, as did John over twenty years ago.

### **Learner-Centered, Critical Strategies**

John's elite gaming as also impressed upon me the important role of strategy in his thinking about games. Through the interviews shared in Chapter 5, John talked frequently about the ways that his innovation on strategy was a point of pride. Scoring a point or winning a game was not enough for him, as an elite gamer, since he felt that anyone could do that, given enough time and support. Instead, the way he made a name for himself within a guild, server, or game was to push the limits of what had been done and create strategies that could then be replicated. From his accounts of the other elite gamers he has played with, this innovation on strategy seems to be a goal of this gaming affinity group.

In my mind, this emphasizes the role of John's affinity group's values in guiding his choices moment-by-moment within a game. Here I see the importance of the *Model of Nested Transaction* that I created from this data. At the same time, however, in the midst of this community-centered goal, strategy-formation was a personal project for John. He was energized by new challenges that forced him to adapt past strategies for new contexts or for playing against previous opponents who had seen his moves before and therefore had created counters-attacks for them. Again, this collaborative strategy-formation challenges traditional schooling methods, since more often than not teachers distribute pre-packaged "strategies" that are rigidly defined and understood to be useful in all contexts for all learners. The learner's unique strengths or weaknesses, changing

contexts, or alternative purposes are ignored, and yet once instruction concludes, students rarely apply such strategies to real-world instances. From John's experiences it seems that when strategic thinking is a) the *learner's* project, rather than an authority's objective and b) is adaptable and purpose-driven, it becomes a meaningful learning tool.

### **Identity Goals Leading Learning**

Believing to have had a relatively firm understanding of who John is as an individual and loved one, I was surprised to realize that, as he engages with video games, he is in a constant state of projective identity development. Based upon the data, he had a generally stable identity that was minimally impacted by the world around him. Through this study, however, a larger understanding of John as in a state of *becoming* in his identity as an elite gamer, rather than as a more finished construction, became clear. The choices he makes in his gaming are not only about meeting the expectations of the affinity group he belongs to, but also the personal project of the Embodied Gamer he hopes to live out, as described more fully in my *Model of Nested Transaction*. This became especially evident throughout several of the think scenes, specifically "How to Ruin a LAN Party," as he tried unsuccessfully to both navigate a moment of shared flow with a friend and maintain new relationships with his work colleague, and "Death by Group Chat," as Sephiroth, Romeo, and Juliet presented challenges as John attempted to salvage a relatively doomed group of players. In both instances, John had to negotiate the reality of the moment with the kind of player he wanted to be seen as, both by others and by himself. This understanding was further confirmed as I witnessed him make particular ethical choices in *SW:TOR* (Bioware, 2011), as described in Chapter 5. Again, meeting the goals of the game were not enough for John; he wanted to navigate this game in such

a way as to enact a particular moral stance through Zero/John that the real-world John could feel good about. Over all, John wants to be seen as the type of elite gamer who is capable, informed, strategic, reliable, and ethical; each gaming instance in provides him with opportunities to work on projecting this through the choices he makes and how they are executed.

Understandings that position learning as a personal and ongoing identity project challenges traditional schooling practices as well. Rarely are children and adolescents' projective goals and identities considered when teachers and policy makers construct curricula. While I believe that most teachers sincerely hope that children enjoy learning and see the content they teach as meaningful, in my work alongside in-service teachers it does not seem to be common practice to consider the questions, concerns, goals, or funds of knowledge (Moll & Greenberg, 1990) of students in terms of construction of curriculum, engagements, or readings. As a result, learners are positioned as passive recipients of knowledge, as has been eloquently articulated in Freire's (1970/2000) work as the banking model of learning. As can be seen by the dates of my citations of Moll and Greenberg and Freire, this is not a new conversation in the field, but one that education has yet to seriously and actionably consider on a scale that would position it as the larger norm of schooling practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. John's experiences demonstrate that authentic learning uses the learner's personal project as the intersection of content and method. The projective stance of learning, that which is based upon learners' identity goals and needs, directly juxtaposes current schooling practices and the possibilities he has been afforded as an elite gamer.

### **Joyful Learning and Breaking the Mold**

Furthermore, John's learning seems to have had a non-linear progression across time. It has come in starts and stops. It has depended upon the amount and nature of time and resources available at particular moment in his experience. It has been attended by moments of excitement and discovery, as well as sometimes persistent, but satisfying, practice with a particular skill. One need only listen to the audio of the footage in Chapter 6 to hear the energy and tone in his voice as he successfully implemented a strategy that he had not been certain would work in action. It was through watching such moments of explicit learning take place across the data that I began to more fully understand the enjoyment John gains from gaming. The thrill he seemed to experience seemed above and beyond my own more humble gaming experiences as a newbie for whom everything is more effortful. It is this very enjoyment that has made the many hours he has invested in game play far from tedious or monotonous. Indeed, the freedom from external controls and time limitations has freed him from any of the pressures and stresses experienced in more constrained contexts. Indeed, considering John's gaming across this study has caused me to reconsider the role of enjoyment in my own work and learning, realizing that I am often at my most successful when I can learn and work playfully and joyfully—which I have come to find often requires a less rigid concern for the amount of time I take to do so.

In considering the nature of John's learning and enjoyment, which I have argued are intimately related, I cannot help but wonder what the world would look like were schools to provide such experiences. For this to happen, the greatest challenge would be for schools to reimagine learning as different from the current step-wise, prescriptive

models of children's capacities that positions children and adolescents as having limited rates and trajectories of learning in order to "meet" particular standards of normal. Indeed the whole idea of standards is counter to the kind of learning John engages in as an elite gamer. Standardization of education has been denounced as far back as John Dewey (1911/2001), who argued over one hundred years ago for education that honors the time and opportunities students of varied interests and abilities need to come to deep understandings of a democratic curriculum.

Taken together, much of what John's experiences and accounts that have been part of this study have resulted in powerful understandings, particularly when contrasted to current practices in American schooling. Certainly, this study speaks to the findings relevant to only one participant, thereby limiting my ability to speak for the experiences of other elite gamers, which may or may not differ in interesting ways. However, I see the findings of this work as critically challenging educational norms as they exist at this moment, many of which present learning as privileging only a limited range of ability, interests, or practices for students to be labeled successful (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990b; Smith, 1998). In what follows, I describe several implications of these understandings as I see them for both educators and researchers alike.

### **Implications for Learning and Literacy**

In looking across the larger understandings that the findings of this study have lead me to, there are many significant implications for teachers, administrators, parents, school boards, and other stakeholders who are interested in providing children and adolescents with powerful learning and literacy experiences. As a teacher educator, professor, former secondary teacher, and mother, I find these implications critical. Taken



together, these implications argue that a faith in and respect for learners is necessary to advance teaching practices. All of the understandings outlined above speak to learners' needs for literate out-of-school lives, personal autonomy balanced with support among communities, choice so as to support projective identities and authentic purposes, and flexible timelines for learning trajectories. In practice, these may play out in interesting ways.

### **Learners Need to be Known and Acknowledged**

In demonstrating a faith in learners, teachers must recognize that children are not in fact blank canvases, but instead enter the classroom with a wealth of experiences, knowledge sets, values, languages, beliefs, theories, relationships, and questions (Moll and Greenberg, 1990). In fact, there seems to be a pervasive understanding among teachers that, unless children are physically within the school building or completing homework, they are not capable of learning anything at all, let alone anything of worth (Smith, 1998). Increasingly, however, research argues that this is certainly *not* the case (Beavis & O'Mara, 2010; Bissell, 2010; Gee, 2003/2007; Gee, 2012; Gerber, 2009; Selfe, Marack, & Gardiner, 2007; Smith, 1998). This is particularly true of literacy. As Hawisher & Selfe (2004) have put it, when we fail to investigate and acknowledge the literacies students maintain beyond the walls of the classroom,

"We fail to build on the literacies that students already have--- and we fail to learn about these literacies or why they seem so important to so many students. We also fail, as we deny the value of these new literacies, to recognize ourselves as illiterate in some sphere. And in the intellectual arrogance, we neglect to open

ourselves to learning new literacies that could teach us more about human discursive practices." (p.676)

By failing to acknowledge the literacies and learning that students engage with beyond the walls of the classroom, educators de-legitimize those experiences, as well as limit their own understandings of the nature of learning and their students.

In many ways, John's teachers did just that. They were often frustrated by the questions he asked or the information he had gathered from beyond the text book, seeing both as threatening. They had no idea about the extensive reading he conducted outside of school texts, nor did they realize that he was participating in an entirely new kind of writing—writing computer code to advance his game play opportunities. His teachers missed many opportunities to build upon, acknowledge, or learn from John's out-of-school experiences, largely because they didn't know much about him.

Educators need to come to know the learners whom they serve, whether through extensive kid-watching (Goodman, 1978), curricular planning processes that draw in students' interests and backgrounds so as to develop enduring understandings (Wiggins & McTighe 2006), or engaging with students in authentic conversation about their lives, interests, goals, and experiences that motivate them (Freire, 1972/2000). It may be striking to the reader to note many of the dates that I have chosen to draw upon in citations across this discussion. I have done so to emphasize how long we have known better as a field of educators; we have known that good pedagogy should be student-centered, relevant to real-world purposes, and supporting the needs of the whole child. I believe that a serious deficit in current educational institutions is not knowledge, resources, or faculty, but a dearth of faith that children have anything of worth that they

bring to the content they are to learn in the classroom, leading to an assumption that learning must be controlled meticulously by the teacher, that learning cannot be the project of the learner. It is time the field address this deficit through pedagogy that honors learners' funds of knowledge (Moll & Greenberg, 1990) and the learners themselves.

### **Learners' Out-of-School Literacies Matter**

More specifically, learners need teachers to acknowledge and honor the literacies that children and adolescents bring to the classroom (Hawisher, & Selfe, 2004). In John's own literate life, he reads and writes a range of texts (e.g. novels, online periodicals, message boards, cheat codes, manga, comic books, video games, gaming footage, etc.) for various purposes (e.g. to improve his skill in a video game, for enjoyment, to learn about new technologies, to acquire new strategies, etc.). Likewise, today's students are exposed to increasingly complex texts which they seek out for personally meaningful purposes, the large majority of which are not acknowledged as texts which hold any measure of academic value or rigor (Lynch, 2012). The end result is that there is a very narrow definition of what it means to be literate and successful in school, yet a broad range of what it means to fail (Csikzentmihalyi, (1990b). In order for teachers to build upon, extend, and honor the literacies children come in with, they will need to take on a more additive view of what counts as literacy and text, understanding that school-based texts are but a limited sample of the possibilities in a digital world. In concluding this study, I cannot help but wonder what might have been had John's teachers positioned him as a knower in light of the knowledges and literacies that he carried with him into classrooms.

### **Strategic Learning can Lead to Critical Learning**

Returning to the theme of teaching requiring a measure of faith in and respect for learners, this study holds important implications for the instruction of strategies in a given content area. In the field of literacy, for example, teachers commonly take a prescriptive strategy, such as creating a KWL (or a table in which readers document what they *know* before reading a text, what they *want* to know, and what they *learned* from reading it). While certainly there are successful ways of using such a scaffold while reading particular texts for particular ways, common mistakes teachers make include a) the strategy is taught a one-size-fits all, giving the illusion that it should support reading for all texts, all purposes, at all times and b) students are positioned as passive recipients of the strategy, since they are not a part of creating, exploring, or choosing it, but instead must accept and apply it unquestioningly. Both of these mistakes position learners as incapable of exploring, hypothesizing, or adapting strategies for themselves, again, as if they are not to be trusted with their own learning.

Instead, teachers must provide learners with room to explore the content; create, try, and revise learning for themselves; and generally make learning *their project* rather than the obligation of another (Gee, 2003/2007). If powerful, authentic learning occurs best in spaces in which one is free to apply a projective stance, thereby making learning about becoming the *kind of person who* is successful in that domain, teachers must intentionally plan for such opportunities. Such instruction demands inquiry into students' understandings of the purpose of a domain and where it intersects with their own lived experiences.

### **Content is Often the Quest**

As Dewey (1911/2001), put it, the point of authentic learning is “not to dwell with wearisome iteration upon the familiar and under the guise of object-lessons...but to enliven and illuminate the ordinary, commonplace, and homely by using it to build up and appreciate situations previously unrealized and alien” (p. 91). To bring in a “previously unrealized” aspect of any content area into the classroom requires a certain amount of risk from teachers. Children may not be successful the first time. They may ask questions teachers don’t know the answers to. They may end up learning unexpected lessons about the content, learning, relationships—who knows. Such instruction is unpredictable and messy. And it requires unwavering courage and faith to trust that children *can* engage in valuable and rigorous exploration of content. While this trust in learners is common among video games designers (Gee, 2003/2007), I argue that the same positioning of learners in the context of classroom instruction would make learning more autotelic (Csikzentmihalyi, 1975), meaningful, and sustainable. Similarly, it requires the same confidence in teachers from administrators, school boards, and parents, all of whom want the children in every classroom to thrive, but may feel it’s just too risky to give up the comfortingly regimented processes that are currently in place, regardless of whether they seem to be what’s best for kids or not.

Taking on such a position is a risk. It is the same risk that farmers take in planting a crop. Ken Robinson (2010) uses the analogy of horticultural time to describe the pace of human learning. He argues that human learning does not fit the confines of industrial time, which is the criteria by which schools establish the length of a class period, curriculum, or grading period. Alternatively, horticultural time acknowledges that, while

there exists in all natural processes, which learning is (Smith, 1998), a sequence of stages and developmental trajectories, they cannot be bound by a particular timeframe. A farmer, for instance, does not rip up a stalk of corn if it is not so high by a certain date and time. Instead, he or she nurtures the whole crop, provides additional nutrients to stalks that are withering, and continues to have faith that they will all do what they were made to do: grow. The farmer understands, however, that not all growth will look the same. Some stalks may be shorter, but more productive, while others yield little fruit, but are quite healthy otherwise.

Put another way, learners are not muffins. They will not all be ready at the same time and in the same way. Teachers, administrators, curriculum designers, policy makers, and parents need to understand this in order to honor learners as they develop in their personal and projective goals. They must resist the *coverage model* of curricular planning, which places priority on the time it takes learners to remember the content long enough for a test, rather than an approach that places the emphasis on depth of learning (Wiggins and McTighe, 2006). In addition, Robinson (2010) adds that schooling has traditionally done a systematically horrible job providing learners with room to explore talents and interests, arguing that this is a primary reason for what he sees as a critical lack of creativity within Western society. As a result, too many individuals finish schooling with little knowledge of the talents and gifts hidden within them. Such exploration requires a privileging of and respect for learners' questions, motivations, and goals over those of the industrial clock. Schools, teachers, and learners must open dialogue as to what such space and time might look like.

### Implications for Further Research

While there are certainly many implications for the classroom, this study also offers a great deal for the research field to consider regarding the methodology, theoretical framework, and representation of data I have used throughout this study.

Methodologically, the work I have accomplished here leaves much for further consideration. For example, in several conversations I have had with novice researchers and colleagues who expressed an interest in MDA processes, many of them were intensely curious as to the analytical methods I used. In my own experience, as I grappled within the literature to untangle what these methods might look like, I found that most texts tended to offer either a very prescriptive view of the process or an almost mystical explanation of how the analysis simply unfolded, as if the data had lives of their own. Researchers clearly have more work to do regarding a candid and clear discussion of MDA methods, particularly as they relate to the larger field of qualitative research. The combination I have used here of MDA with traditional case study inquiry holds a potential direction for further study, use, and discussion, as I found it productive in presenting a multi-dimensional view of John. It was also a powerful tool for constructing what has evolved into my *Model of Nested Transaction*.

In addition, further discussion and research is necessary in consideration of the role of studies centered on intimate others. Qualitative researchers have striven to be recognized as legitimate in the empirical research traditions, and in so doing have often collectively turned their backs on one of the most human and essential ways of coming to know another...through extended engagement in meaningful relationships (St. Pierre,

1997). While studying my husband was not without its challenges, it has made this study all more personally fulfilling as I was reminded *daily* as to why this work matters.

In addition to methodology, the findings of this study are in need of further study. For example, the theoretical framework that I pose here, symbiotic flow, deserves further development. Does this experience pertain to those of other elite gamers? What about other types of gamers? To what extent is it applicable as a more generalizable learning theory? Or is it in need of extensive revision and redirection as other studies apply it to new contexts and gamers? The same is true for the *Model of Nested Transaction*. Continued scrutiny of this model is important, since, should it hold up, it may provide a helpful tool for future research of gaming practices. As with most case study research, conducting research that considers the present questions in light of the histories and experiences of other gamers is important as well, if the field is to establish a body of literature that strives to acknowledge, honor, and support the presence of games and gamers in our society.

I do not see the findings of this study as advocating for the gamification (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011), or the use of games or game-like structures (competitions, points, rewards, etc.), of classrooms. Rather I see them as speaking to the ways in which educators can learn from what works for gamers, in this case an elite gamer, as they transact with games that might then be applied to wider learning contexts. Research needs to consider both the need for further conversation about the nature of learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the need for instruction that builds upon principles that honor authentic learning processes that are reflected in video game design. Put another way, researchers might ask: What if teachers had the same trust in learners as game



designers have in gamers? What might that look like in action? What learning theories might we build upon or construct from such experiences? How might game studies help researchers, educators, and communities heal a system of education that has become primarily an instrument of standardization?

Farther reaching questions pertain to ways in which the academy can begin to open doors of conversation among various stakeholders such as gamers, game designers, parents, teachers, and policy makers. For example, many parents are deeply and understandably troubled by the powerful presence of games in their children's lives; how might researchers bring parents into such dialogues about the nature of their children's gaming? How might teachers legitimize and address the strengths, skills, and needs that gaming students bring with them into the classroom? Gee (2003/2007; 2012) advises that such stakeholders make attempts to play games or at least watch children engage in games. What might an initiative look like that invites parents and teachers to follow Gee's advice? How might the *Model of Nested Transaction* help us better understand possibilities for learning in classroom contexts? Such questions provide those interested in the potentials of video games and/or those who play them with a much needed framework to reimagine schools as places where our youth are prepared for a digital, democratic future.

### **Metaphor for Synthesis of Findings: Composing a Game(r)**

In order to synthesize the findings of this study, I found myself grappling for a metaphor with which to pull ideas together. In striving to construct a metaphor that might most fully encapsulate the gestalt of my understandings of these findings, I found my mind returning to parallels I saw between John's gaming and the concept of composing.

I use the term *composing* similarly to Rosenblatt (1978) as she describes the reader's role in constructing meaning from text: each act of composing is idiosyncratic, temporal, one-of-a-kind, and generative of both meaning of a text and reader. In light of this broad understanding of composing, I see this metaphor as superimposing upon gaming what can be said of composing.

In considering the nature of John's elite gaming, I noticed that he is innovative as he creates, establishes, and develops characters across the trajectory of a game in ways that align with or challenge his personal identity. This creativity is iterative, in that he is never finished with his performance and creation within the game until he finally stops playing it. Similarly, composing is creative, bringing forth new ideas or content to share with others. While there is a process for composing, it is largely iterative in that individuals move backwards and forward throughout progressive stages (Emig, 1971).

Likewise, John has the capacity to revise his strategies, identities, alliances, and understandings as he plays. To do so, he must step back and reflectively evaluate the directions he is taking a particular character or strategy. Most importantly, gaming at elite levels is both self-expressive and self-generative for John; he uses characters, competition, and gaming environments to express aspects of who he is while he is simultaneously re-forming or reifying who he is. Many composers describe their processes similarly. As Ledo Ivo, the Latin American writer, put it, "I increasingly feel that my writing creates me. I am the invention of my own words" (as cited in Murray, 1994). This very process is expressed throughout the *Model of Nested Transaction*, which one could argue is simply a new way of understanding the learning process.

One other, and possibly most critical, similarity between gaming and composing centers on the relationship of the two with one's identity. If individuals compose their identities, crafting a revised version of the gamer, the composer, the parent, the teacher, or the researcher they intend to be, they can alter the meanings they construct in lived experiences (Warnock, 2000). This is a critical point. As Halliday (2005) posits: "The two phenomenal realms that we inhabit, as human beings, are the realm of matter and the realm of meaning. Human history is the unfolding of a constant interplay, and a constant tension, between these two" (p. 61). As individuals compose, or inscribe meaning onto lived experiences, they are in turn shaped by what they subsequently learn about themselves and about those experiences (Freire, 1970/2000; Heath, 1984; Street, 1984). They often find themselves struck by new insights that are first heard in their own voice. It is this very process of engagement in the intersection of matter and meaning that is at the heart of this study as I have worked to consider the ways matter (e.g. video games) mediates John's construction of meaning regarding being an elite gamer.

### **Composing John**

In coming to consider John's gaming in terms of the ways that he builds identities through the video games he plays, I came to realize that I too have been constructing an identity for John in the writing of this very study. I have crafted think scenes (Fitzgerald & Noblit, 1999) to present semi-fictionalized events in John's gaming life history. I have written more prosaically about John's values, understandings, and motivations within his gaming. I have explicated and commentated video footage of John's gaming in action with the use of a theoretical model. One might reasonably wonder why I chose to use three such divergent presentations of John and his gaming.

I agree with Fisher and Albers, (2009) that examining any data point in isolation is misleading and decontextualizes individuals, interfering with our capacity to see them as unique and multifaceted, and neglects the range of ways that they chose to story their lives and create and recreate themselves. By presenting the data in a range of genres and perspectives, I granted myself the liberty of carefully controlling the representation of a loved one to an academic audience. The spaces and modes of representation in traditional qualitative methods are constraining, leaving one challenged by the task of inscribing and presenting nebulous, permeable, and sometimes intimately personal inquiries in such a way as to be easily consumed by a research community (St. Pierre, 1997). Indeed, the very language of consumption is chilling to researchers of intimate others who use, as subjects of our investigations, those whom we love, as we lay bare our dear ones for all to feast upon.

Working with an intimate other positioned me to better present the findings across this study. For example, having had such extensive access to John over time, I was able to weave in the kinds of language and expressions he uses into think scenes. I could tell from the registers of his voice in gaming footage the level of engagement in which he found himself. There were moments in interviews when I could tell that he needed more or less time to consider a question, determining whether I persisted on a theme or moved in a different direction. By knowing John closely, we had greater synergy throughout the study, allowing me to more sensitively compose him across the study.

To begin such a potentially invasive inquiry with narrative think scenes in Chapter 4 was a rhetorical choice as I wanted to introduce the reader to John as they might have met him had they been at the right place at the right time. Due to John's

position as an intimate other, this choice allowed me a bit more control over John's initial perception by the reader, therefore providing both honest interpretation of data and a measure of protection of a loved one. The discussions in Chapter 5 of John's understandings of gaming and himself as a gamer furthered the think-scenes so as to flesh out the values, understandings, perspectives and motivations John brings to his gaming. The MDA of his practice in Chapter 6 provides that critical intersection between who John is and what he does. I acknowledge that to argue that I have portrayed John accurately across these endeavors assumes a level of objective essence and is quite naïve. Instead, I argue that such a range of perspectives portrays John with a measure of complexity that leads that reader to the gestalt of John as a gamer. To present one without the others would have been insufficient. And yet it is important to recall that this is just one aspect of John, as differentiated from John the Husband, John the Father, John the Citizen, or any number of other vital identities that are part of this complex individual. In fact, complexity was a goal of this study, particularly in response to the often reductive language and understandings surrounding topics of gaming and gamers. By presenting John as a multi-faceted gamer, I have been better able to trouble assumptions, misunderstandings, and generalities in the literature to date.

In what follows, I conclude this dissertation with John's words. The reader has heard John speak throughout the data presented across this study, and yet in sharing voice with him throughout our work together, I wanted to end with his words directly to you, the reader. Coming from an advocacy/participatory lens and in hoping to engage John more directly with the game studies research community, this choice seemed a logical ending to both John and me. His participation in this study was driven by a desire to

legitimize the field of gaming for academic audiences. Here, John speaks to why game studies and research such as this dissertation matter beyond just the scope of the academy. He advocates for those, like him, who find intellectual rigor, personal meaning, and depth of enjoyment from video games. I could not have expressed these parting words any better than he has, especially since he deserves to defend, for himself, that which he values so much.

### **John's Closing**

When I was a teenager, banging away on the keyboard late at night working on a BBS or playing a game on someone else's BBS I often thought "Wouldn't it be cool if I could do this for a living?" The job I dreamed of doing didn't exist then and my squawking modem tying up the phone line was akin to voodoo in those days to the people of my small town. I was "wasting my time" and "goofing off". For Christmas one year I asked my mom for a private phone line so I could leave my BBS online all day long so it would gain a following when I published it. She didn't understand what I was doing, and she didn't directly support it, but she also didn't hinder it and that was all the advantage I needed to turn a hobby into a career.

Today's gaming world has grown exponentially since the early 1990s yet the mentality that existed back then has changed only a little. Moms still tell their kids to stop wasting their time on video games, school systems have taken advantage of a small percentage of what the internet can do for them, yet the larger possibilities are slow to be acquired. In my high school days I spent hours upon hours drilling football plays and honing my body so I could run faster and longer than the next guy. This was common because football was the sport in my town. Nobody questioned you if you spent thirty

hours a week on drills in hundred degree temperatures; they called it dedication. Of the hundred or so guys I played football alongside, two of them went on to play in any college worth mentioning and not a single one of them ever made a dollar playing football as a professional. Why is practicing football drills dedication while honing fine motor skills, developing strategic thought processes and pushing yourself to noticeable improvements in your chosen game-- “goofing off?”

I think I should clarify which of my two skills (gaming and BBS development) lead me to become the owner of my own company as a Network Engineering Consultant: gaming. Little of the code I eked out has ever been useful, if anything, that dry work pushed me away from coding for a living. But the gaming kept me coming back. Gaming caused me to learn the hardware side of computers so I could continue to upgrade my computer. No Geek Squad existed in my town unless you knew me and asked for my help. Gaming led me to develop my strategic thinking and problem solving skills that I use every day at my job. Online gaming is the direct reason I can type 80+ words a minute without ever having taken a typing course and online gaming gave me the patience and management skills I use today on engineering projects where I have to coordinate with dozens of other people to align the timing and implementation of the work load. I must admit to being a little selfish though. Gaming isn't all about real world application; in fact, the subtle merging of applicable skills to gaming environments wasn't something I sought.

More than anything, however, I play in search of the zone. Michael Jordan was/is the greatest basketball player to ever play the game. I was not a Bulls fan until MJ stepped on the court and then I couldn't take my eyes off of him. I couldn't put into

words why I was mesmerized by his play style until I heard him talk about “being in the zone”. When he said that, I could relate. Gaming gives me access to “the zone” that nothing else I’ve done ever has. When I have practiced a game enough, my hands move on their own, my mind doesn’t think of strategies, I know what will happen and what I have to do to counter it. I haven't done drugs. I don't know what drugs feel like. I haven't drunk alcohol, so I don't know what that feels like. I have to think that that feeling is what people are looking for. I don't know, because I can't compare it, but I have to think that they are looking for something that feels in tune with the universe, because it's peaceful... it's like you're riding a chaotic storm but it's completely calm for you. You’re in complete control. I believe that storm has sharpened me in a way that no other aspect of my life could have so I keep chasing it.



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## APPENDIXES

## APPENDIX A

## Data Sources and Analytical Procedures

Data source	Purpose	My Analysis
Semi-structured Interview	To draw out John's understandings of gaming, flow, and engagement within gaming communities	I will open code for key phenomena, experiences, identities, and understandings related to gaming that: a) build upon consistent themes within and across interviews and data, b) diverge from other interviews or data to explore new directions, and c) for areas of ambiguity or inconsistency that might be addressed in the future.
Observation	To connect John's real world actions with those of the virtual character within the game, locating the points of transaction.	I will observe with an eye toward events that prove to be: a) present opportunities for John to experience flow, b) connected to a specific mediational tool, 3) of a heightened intensity, 4) or interestingly engaged with others in the game. Those specific moments will be named according to action sequences, categorized, and embedded within a nexus of practice. (See Table 3 for an example.)
Debriefing Interview	To layer data relating to actions within John's playing with his understandings of their meanings.	Transcripts from these interviews will directly inform my coding of observations and my require revisions of those analyses. I will memo reoccurring or unique themes and compare them with other data sources.
Theme Analysis	To include John in the generation, classification, and prioritization of themes as he sees them in his own experience.	I will compare, contrast, and synthesize John's understandings of themes with my own formative ideas.
Researcher Journal	To record instances outside of the scope of the other data pertaining to the study; to reflect upon my shifting understandings of gaming, John's participation, and implications for younger generations of gamers.	I will open code for key phenomena, experiences, identities, and understandings related to the study that: a) build upon consistent themes, b) diverge from other previous reflections, and c) for areas of ambiguity or inconsistency that might be addressed in the future.

## APPENDIX B

## Interview Questions and Co-Analysis Themes

Note: These questions provide a framework with which to scaffold the interviews. These questions are taken directly from the notes I constructed in preparation for the interviews.

Initial Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk about your first memories of playing video games.</li> <li>• Growing up, what roles did video games play in your life? (implied)</li> <li>• What do you think makes you a strong gamer?</li> <li>• What influences have led you to play the way you do within game?</li> <li>• What makes a good video game?</li> <li>• Describe the gaming communities you are a part of.</li> <li>• What roles to you tend to play within them?</li> <li>• What makes gaming so enjoyable for you?</li> <li>• Describe what you experience when you are playing at your best?</li> <li>• What are your initial thoughts about what gaming means to you?</li> </ul>
2 <sup>nd</sup> Interview
<p>Theme: Developing as a Gamer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Exactly what abilities (natural or learned) do you think one needs to excel in gaming?</li> <li>- Are any of these more important than others?</li> <li>- How do most gamers master these abilities?</li> <li>- In what ways have your abilities as a gamer developed over your gaming experiences?</li> <li>-What experiences fostered this type of development?</li> <li>- Would you say that gaming is as enjoyable for you as it was when you were younger?</li> </ul> <p>Theme: In-game Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How do you learn a game?</li> <li>- Do you see games as work, play, or both? Talk about that.</li> <li>- In addition to gaming, you enjoy and follow sports, comic books, the work or specific science fiction and fantasy authors, Dungeons and Dragons, current events, among other things. Do you see any important connections among these hobbies and interests and your gaming?</li> <li>- What expectations do you have when logging onto a game?</li> </ul> <p>Theme: Gaming with Others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- You described yourself, in our first interview, as a leader in games. You talked largely about the ways that you were able to lead in raids and in gaming situations specifically. Do you see yourself as a leader among your gaming friends as well,</li> </ul>

or do you feel like you would describe your role among them differently?  
 - How do you relate to new comers in your circle of friends?  
 - What are coming topics of conversation on the Vent when you and the guys are BSing? What are coming topics during serious game play? When winning? When losing?

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Interview

#### Theme: Character Creation

- In the observation video footage, I had a chance to see several characters. Talk me through your tank and healer and the decisions you made while creating them.
- What do you take into consideration as you build characters?
- Are you done building character once you load into the game, or is there more to it?
- What do you take into consideration when you consider your three response options from the story-based dialogue in the game?
- In what ways are your experiences with these two characters different from each other?
- Do you prefer one class to another? Why?

#### Theme: Social Reliance

- It seems to me that there is a symbiotic dependency at play here. You require a healer, in the Hutt Ball game, for example, to survive long enough to do major damage. Your healer requires you, to take the brunt of the damage. How does that impact the social aspect of the game, for you?
- Talk to me about this new guild.
- Talk to me about this new healer you've been playing with.

#### Theme: Narratives

- Read together the failed vignette 2. Tell me what's missing here.
- Any old/new stories you'd like to capture on tape?

### 4<sup>th</sup> Interview

#### Theme: Greatness

- What does greatness mean to you? What words come to mind when you think of greatness?
- Can there be greatness without competition? How do you see that playing out in video games?
- What relationship do you see between Success and Gratification?
  - Can you be successful but not gratified?
  - Can you be gratified but not successful?

#### Theme: Relationships and Games

- Long term gaming relationships: how do games impact relationships among long-term friends?
- How important are guilds to your ability to flow? What affordances do they provide? What limitations?
- How are things going in your new guild, Genesis?
- Talk about flow in Star Wars: Why the delay? What is different now?
- How important are others to your flow?

#### Theme: Past/Future

- In looking across your timeline, talk me through what you remember about how

you felt about “being a gamer.” Was there ever a shift in how you viewed yourself in relationship to games?

- In Interview 2, you talked about the fact that the "world is changing," and then went on to talk specifically about the rise of gaming as a legitimate competitive game. If you were to expand the view to our larger historical context, how do you see gaming as fitting into our current and future world?

#### 5<sup>th</sup> Interview

- You said that you are pretty much done developing your character after the initial set up, but the described several ways that, across games, you have opportunities to further define and develop them. Can you clarify your thoughts on this for me?
- Talk more about your persona-building.
- I wonder if the reason you see character development as initially over is because, for you, end-game is all important. To set yourself on the trajectory you need to be on to reach the max level equipped for endgame content, maybe you have to have already made the more important decisions from the beginning and the rest is just letting those choices play out?
- As we talked last time about McGonagall’s ideas, you said “But if you want to get your awesome looking breastplate or your cool looking sword, you’re gonna have to slay the dragon. Now, you can say you went to slay it to prevent people from dying or you slayed it because you didn’t like to way dragons look, but that’s just you role-playing in your freakin’ head, because you either got the sword or you didn’t.” If the intention of an MMO RPG is in fact that players role play, would this not be a type of goodness as a practiced part of playing games, which might then be internalized over time? (10,000 hr rule?)
- Do you ever feel that you are intentionally trying to portray yourself as a certain kind of person as you play?
- When you talked about McGonagall’s work, you talked about how limited in choice players really are in games like WoW. To what extent do you think choice is important to playing video games?
- I wonder here if this loitering actually serves as some kind of "expert in waiting" within the game. By positioning themselves there, players a) receive social acknowledgement of their accomplishments, b) are available to share their experiences with others, and c) provide role models for others.
- Describe your experience of this to someone who has never felt this. What does it feel like? How does it work?
- Has the process of considering these questions, talking in interviews, and recording and debriefing videos influenced the way you play the game in any way? For better or worse?

#### Co-Analysis Interview

##### Initial Themes:

- Uses time as a gaming commodity, whereas time represents level of dedication and therefore insider status. Time provides for-
  - o Source of experience
  - o Coming to know the mechanics of the game as well as archetypes of players

- o Allows for researching around games, problems, and what's new.
- O Positions gamers as insiders
- Other players become both limitations and affordances, while still humanized.
  - o Limitations: trolling, casual gamers, newbs, unreliable guildmates, etc.
  - o Affordances: wetting stone (i.e. Jeremy example); cooperative flow (int. 4)
- To be a gamer: Digital Elder
  - o When faced with Trolls: try to neutralize the damage they do to situated group
  - o When faced with Newbs: educate, guide, instruct, advise
  - o When faces with More Capable Others: respect, appreciate, and see as learning opportunity
- Games provide players with possibilities for greatness, and goodness, but both are optional and depend on purposes of playing.

## APPENDIX C

## Original "Morning at the Cue"

I have to win.

It's 11:27 on a Tuesday morning. Jeremy and I, we've been in line for about half an hour just to get our turn to play. This guy is pretty good. He's about double my age...maybe not quite. He should probably be at work just like I should probably be taking that History exam right now. Guess we both have our own priorities.

Shit. Focus, John. What the hell just happened? How did he just hit me for a quarter of my life? Alright, how is he doing that? I watch. His fingers slap the buttons on the *Super Street Fighter: Championship Edition* cabinet as if they had a life of their own. He's always just a second ahead of me. I study him. I have to win.

I can't afford to lose. Literally. I don't have money to keep chucking down this machine. I'm running low on funds, since it's been the better part of a school year since I mowed all those miles of lawns, and most of that cash went for my *Daredevil #1*. And in this pool hall, the rule is winner stays, loser pays. I've gotta stay, 'cause I can't pay.

Get it together, John. Okay. I see what he's doing, now. That's pretty smart. Let's give him a little tit for tat. That's right. Cuss all you want, buddy. I've got you figured out. I see what you're doing, and if I can see what you're doing, I can see your vulnerabilities. Damn, my hands are sweating. I'm pretty sure I saw his slip too, though. I've got him on his heels. I can't lose.

The frantic music of the game. The stereotypical civilians cheering from behind our characters. Even the now oily surface of the joystick seemed to fade away. I don't know where Jeremy is. I just know that this guy is doomed. It's nothing personal. It's just that if it's him or me sitting down, I'd rather it be him. I've almost got him. Damn it. Why isn't this...? Got him!

I win.