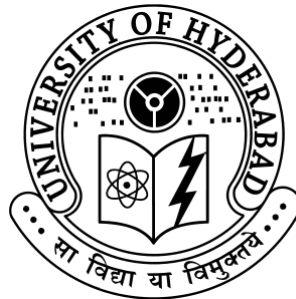**Digital Play in Everyday Life:**

The Ludic Practices of Indian Gamers

Ph.D. Thesis submitted to

University of Hyderabad

for the award of the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN COMMUNICATION

By

Aditya Deshbandhu

Department of Communication

Sarojini Naidu School of Arts & Communication

University of Hyderabad

2017

DECLARATION

I, ADITYA DESHBANDHU, hereby declare that this doctoral thesis entitled "Digital Play in Everyday Life: The Ludic Practices of Indian Gamers," submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of Prof. Usha Raman is bonafide research work and is free from plagiarism. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this University or any other University of Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodganga/INFLIBNET.

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Parts of this thesis have been:

 A. Published in the following publications:

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and

 B. Presented in the following conferences:

 Life across screens: A ludological autoethnography of gaming platforms today at Annual
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 Hyderabad, July 15-19 2014. (International)

Further, the student has passed the following courses towards fulfillment of coursework requirement for Ph.D.:

	Course Code	Name	Credits	Pass/Fail
1.	CC – 801	Advance Research Theory	4	Pass
2.	CC – 802	Advance Research Methodology	4	Pass
3.	CC – 803	Game Studies and New Media	4	Pass

  Supervisor   **Head of Department**   **Dean of School**

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Fun, Magic and Play: Theories of Gaming

Introduction

One of my earliest memories of playing a video game relates to a 24-hour train ride from Delhi to Hyderabad in the month of June 1997; the heat scorching and the compartment oven-like. Despite the railways' stuttering air conditioning system, the atmosphere in the compartment was hot and sticky. With no company of my own age, I was left with my *Brick Games* handheld device and I spent hours playing the variety of games bundled on it. There was *Tetris*, *Brick Breaker,* a variant of a racing game where one needed to avoid collisions, an early version of Nokia's popular *Space Impact* and a number of other games I cannot recall. Armed with a strip of AA cells and powered by a vivid imagination the hours went by in a blur. Fast forward eighteen years later, I observe that with the advent of mobile phones a large number of people fill their travel time in buses, trains, subways and at airport terminals, playing games.

After that train ride, my passion for video games continued unabated as I spent hours crouched before the family personal computer playing a wide variety of games and gaining experience in the various video game genres and approaches to gameplay. Soon, I was spending a critical number of hours playing video games, causing my parents to grow worried about addiction and prompting them to send me to a boarding school (a primitive digital detox of sorts!). At the boarding school, I soon forayed into reading fiction and fantasy as I dove into J.K. Rowling and J.R.R. Tolkien with gusto and discovered Christopher Paolini and Tamora Pierce along the way. To this day, I reminisce of my vacations from school as

short periods of sunshine on a dull gray day as I would try and play as many video games as possible in the sporadic bursts of time at my disposal. School was followed by college and with time, came balance, as I was soon able to restrict my hours of video game play which became just another activity that was as important as reading books, listening to music and playing sports.

After graduating from a master's program in communication, I was teaching courses on Media Management and Business in 2012 when I began to ponder the need for media studies to embrace video games as a medium of study. However, now that I reflect back on my choice I think one of the largest driving factors for choosing to study video games and gaming culture for a doctoral thesis was to try and understand a favorite hobby in its entirety; to try and find others who valued their gaming practices as much as I did and then try and find a means to study the medium and connect those experiences to broader academic inquiry. As a gamer, I also wished to challenge mainstream media's reportage of video game research, a biased coverage only bound by the role and affect video games have on violence amongst adolescents and teenagers.

A big challenge through the course of the study was to try and make the research seem non-trivial and not be trapped by the general definition of video games as an activity which is predominantly engaged with by young adults and teenagers. One of the questions posed to me after a presentation at the IAMCR (International Association for Media and Communication Research) conference in 2014 specifically asked me of what use was video game research to adults and people who were "not kids." While, it would be ironic to think of medium characterized by fun and play as "serious," this study charts the gaming lives of

participants who take their gaming very seriously and look at it as a key way to define themselves and their lives as an extension. Participants, who have spent years refining their techniques of play and finding ways to come back and find time to play despite things "getting serious" in their offline lives as they progressed from high school students to undergraduates and eventually employees, husbands and girlfriends in the grander scheme of things.

The largest demographic of video game players are people between the ages of 21-39 (Superdata, 2016; Newzoo Games, 2016). People who grew up playing video games now have children who do the same and the activity has now become a family tradition akin to watching television or movies. If the industry numbers are to be believed then the global sales of video games and other forms of revenue generation by game developers are an economic force to reckon with as the global internet and mobile revolutions have spurred the interest to new heights.

The size and resilience of the video game industry first came to light with the 2008 global economic slowdown which hampered mass media industries across the board causing a dip in sales and consequent budget cuts. Video games however not only continued to maintain their sales figure but actually posted stronger compound annual growth rate numbers (CAGR) in the corresponding period. Industry analysts claim that it follows a life cycle of its own and is much more dependent on the various trends emerging within the industry than on external economic factors (The Economist, 2008). At the beginning of this study in 2012, Forbes and PricewaterhouseCoopers estimated the size of the global gaming industry to touch USD 82 Billion by 2017, a prediction the industry sales figures beat in 2016 itself by

touching USD 91 Billion (SuperData, 2016). The larger than speculated growth was spurred by the rapid jump in revenues from the mobile and free to play markets as the mobile market alone accounted for a shade over USD 40 Billion.

Interactive entertainment generated $91 billion in revenues in 2016

$40.6 Mobile $35.8 PC* $6.6B Console $0.9B eSports $4.4B Gaming Video $2.7B VR

Consumers spent $41 billion on mobile gaming in 2016, driven by blockbuster hits like *Pokémon GO* and *Clash Royale.* The mobile games market has started to mature and now more closely resembles traditional games publishing, requiring ever higher production values and marketing spend.

The first year for virtual reality was sobering, especially for manufacturers of dedicated hardware. A high price point, the absence of a strong content line-up, and difficulties with properly delivering through retail cooled consumers' expectations of the Oculus. We expect firms with more experience in hardware manufacturing like Sony and HTC to take the lead in 2017.

Despite its relatively small size ($892 million), eSports has become the focal point for publishers, TV executives, and advertisers. A string of investments in pursuit of connecting to a new generation of media consumers has built the segment's momentum, as major publishers like Activision, Riot Games, and Electronic Arts are exploring new revenue streams like selling media rights in 2017.

Consumers increasingly download games directly to their consoles, spending $6.6 billion in 2016. The move improves margins across the board, and allows publishers to generate revenue through the sales of add-on content, expansion packs, and micro-transactions.

At PC gaming continues to do well, earning $34 billion and driven largely by free-to-play online titles and downloadable games. Incumbents like *League of Legends* together with newcomers like *Overwatch* drive enthusiasm. PC gamers also saw a big improvement with the release of a new generation of graphics cards, offering a 40% increase in graphics power and a 20% reduction of power consumption.

*Includes Social, PC free-to-play, PC subscription and Premium PC games

SUPERDATA

Figure 1: Global Gaming Industry breakdown, picture courtesy: SuperData (2016)

The smartphone revolution coupled with the arrival of high-speed internet on the phone (LTE, 4G and 3G) has been instrumental in the rapid popularization of the mobile as the preferred platform for hassle-free and portable gaming. 2016, saw the release of incredibly popular games like *Pokémon Go* and *Clash Royale. Pokémon Go* in particular ushered in the era of augmented reality into thee gaming landscape as it amassed over 40 million users within two months of launch. The incredibly high rate of adoption coupled with newer ways of monetization has seen a shift in developers' priorities as a variety of game genres and

popular titles have begun to have mobile variants. To illustrate the point a title like *Super Mario,* which was coveted by Nintendo zealously and protected for its platform exclusivity has since entered the smartphone markets.

Closer to home, the popularity of mobile gaming in India has been significant as well. The delayed roll-out of *Pokémon Go* saw a huge number of players circumnavigate the process as they forced play causing the developer, Niantic to geo-block the nation as their servers couldn't handle the influx of players (Manorama, 2016). India reported revenues of USD 543 Million in 2016 and this figure is estimated to go up to USD 881 Million by 2022 (CAGR 6.61%). In the mobile market, games like *Candy Crush Saga*, *Subway Surfers* and *Temple Run 2* dominated, Indian players downloaded over 300 million mobile games in the 2nd Quarter of 2016 alone as India is now ranked 5th in the world for number of mobile game downloads (App Annie & NASSCOM, 2016). The same report also finds that this spurt in the market is due to the increase in availability of low priced, hi-powered phones as Android has become the preferred ecosystem across urban and lower tier cities (App Annie & NASSCOM, 2016 p.8).

Research has emerged from India which studies the adoption of the internet and its use as a platform to engage with activities of leisure as a means of development and empowerment. Nimmi Rangaswamy in particular, looks at how people from economically disadvantaged coomunities acquire new skills and repurpose technology to their advantage (Rangaswamy & Densmore, 2013). Her work also looks at the various motivations that drive ICTs for leisure, a new media framework she uses to understand the "internet in the wild" (Arora, P., & Rangaswamy, N. 2013; Arora, P., & Rangaswamy, N. 2014). However, this study while

studying the internet practices of Indian players of video games does not use or draw upon an empowerment or development perspective but instead is interested in arriving at a broader understanding of gaming culture.

With the steep rise of mobile gaming, another tricky challenge of this study was to determine an appropriate pool of participants who would offer the required range and depth of experience from which to draw insights. While there is a generally accepted binary (both amongst the video game industry and researchers) that classifies players of video game into "hardcore gamers" and "casual players," (Kerr, 2006; Consalvo, 2009c; Juul, 2010) it became necessary to first decide if this study would only examine the former as their tag suggests that they are more likely to take their gaming seriously. However, over time the importance of having a well-informed participant pool that included experienced players across platforms become increasingly evident as the study focused on understanding gaming culture as a whole.

The need for a holistic understanding of Indian gaming publics and the gaming market has become increasingly essential in the last decade with the emergence of a newly affluent middle class. With the country's urban middle class increasingly embracing a lifestyle seamlessly intertwined with their digital choices and preferences, India is finely poised to become a global gaming power as playing video games becomes a popular leisure activity of choice. Consequently, we require an understanding that would take into account the layers

of social, cultural and political contexts that Indians who engage with games might live within and negotiate—as people and as gamers

The next decade seems to be an extremely transformative one for both the gaming industry and India is a country. The former has to grapple with newer modes of engagement and interaction like virtual, augmented and mixed realities while also factor in ways to refresh the allure of conventional gaming platforms as "casual games" become increasingly more lucrative for developers. India on the other hand must adapt and take adequate steps to lay the foundations of a well-planned information/knowledge society that can empower and enable its digital citizens of the future. We at this moment have the rare luxury of being in a Kantian moment of prognostication[1] as we begin the understanding of the role of leisure and the industry of leisure in a digital economy. This attempt to understand Indian gaming culture is a small step in comprehending the larger umbrella term of "digital leisure activities," a small spectrum of these activities today include binge watching, consuming streaming content, social network based communications and virtual and augmented reality based experiences.

Through the course of this study I have come across some very interesting concepts and the work of notable game studies scholars. I would especially like to point at the influence of Espen Aarseth and his fellow researchers at the IT University of Copenhagen on my earlier understanding of the field. Aarseth's deep seated mistrust of New Media Studies aside[2], I

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[1] In his seminal piece What is Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant looks at the charged political nature of 18th century Europe and anticipates the French revolution and the subsequent rise of modernity and liberal humanism. He uses his piece by asking the German public to temper their angst and dissuades them from rising against the German monarchy (Kant, 2013).
[2] In his editorial for Game Studies – 0101, Aarseth calls new media studies a "pseudo-field" and a ploy used by visual studies to claim computer-based communication and subsume video-games. (Aarseth, 2001)

found his unique 'ergodic' (a way of interaction that is more intense and on a level much deeper than what conventional new media platforms and digitality offer) approach an eye opener of sorts as I began to grapple with the quandary that a truly fluid medium that offered high levels of agency and choice posed for analysis of texts in a conventional sense (Aarseth, 1997). Similarly, I began this study armed with the understanding of Turkle's seminal *Life on the Screen* and I found Jesper Juul's notion of Half Real to be an extension of her work (Turkle, 1995; Juul, 2005). His understanding of the slaying of the mythical in-game dragon in a virtual space but bound by real rules that govern virtual worlds indicated the blurred online-offline space in which players existed as well as indicated the importance of not trivializing players' efforts in ludic spaces (Juul, 2005).

I have also been fascinated by the contribution of scholars like Taylor, Shaw and Consalvo as they offer a more player-based approach to game studies. While Aarseth coined the term ergodic, the problem over time has been that the word has lost a bit of its sheen, with most scholars interpreting it only as a synonym to interactivity at best. The need for game studies scholars to redefine ergodic is now more than ever, lest we lose the essence of the word altogether. I strongly believe that by using players' experiences and studying video game culture from the players' points of view could be an exciting way to do so. Carefully charting and critically examining the experiences players have in game worlds will allow us to study interactivity as not merely a singular term that denotes a human computer interface (HCI) but as a wide spectrum which at its most basic level allows for hypertext and non-linear reading but at the other extreme allows for in-depth engagement in virtual worlds. Worlds rendered in immense detail by video games and adventures of virtual, augmented and mixed

realities. Ergodic than as a term becomes ideal to denote these in-depth levels of engagement.

This study while drawing heavily from the perspectives of Aarseth and his cohort from the ITU is more in line with the processual work of Boellstorff, Taylor, Consalvo and Shaw as it focuses on the engagements and negotiations of players with gaming metaverses and uses their ludic experiences to understand gaming culture.

Game Studies

Defining a Game

The term *game* has baffled researchers, philosophers and academics, and arriving at a comprehensive definition has been one of the most challenging pursuits for scholars of game studies. The term is disarmingly simple while also applicable to an astonishingly wide range of activities that have nothing in common. A simple instance of hide and seek can be classified as a game and so can a complex round of *Go*. One of the easiest ways to try and define games would be to use the key *fun* element but 'fun' seems to be a very contextually, perceptually constrained term. While we might agree that a round of monopoly can be fun for all parties involved, the same cannot be said for a bout of Mixed Martial Arts combat. The simplistic understanding of games as fun must be rejected because fun is not necessarily an intrinsic attribute for all games as several activities of play and sport are at times sites of work and this shift sees the intensity and gravity of the situation effectively take fun out of the picture.

Stenros, in his book *Playfulness, Play and Games* classifies all the attempts to define games into three broad categories: the first where games can be defined using activities; the second where they can be understood as formal systems; and lastly, where they can be interpreted as social constructs (Stenros, 2015). Huizinga and Maigaard are often cited for their early attempts to define games. They were often reliant on examples of fun/playful activities to define the term. Huizinga in his book *Homo Ludens* defines games as activities played out in specific times and places where at the time play the sites transform into playgrounds that are then governed by specific rules (Huizinga, 1938/1955/1986). Maigaard, credited for first using the term ludology in 1951 sees games as activities which are not "real work", i.e.,

activities for livelihood or physiological function, and he terms them as activities that may be considered unnecessary and performed as a mere indulgence. He is keen to point out that games are activities in which people involve out of desire and concedes that the same can be said of "real work" activities, also noting that the boundaries between work and play are blurring at best (Maigaard, 1951).

Caillois carries forward the activity approach and categorizes gameworthy activities into four. He also introduces the terms paida (play) and ludus (game) to understand these activities. The four categories he suggests are: *Agon*, or activities involving completion which generally have favorable outcomes; *Alea,* activities where the outcomes are dictated by chance and fortune; *Mimicry,* where the activities involve role-play and imitation; and lastly, *Ilinx* to describe activities which deal with elements of vertigo (Caillois, 1958/2001).

Crawford posits a systemic understanding of video games when he calls them a "fundamental part of human existence" (Crawford, 1984 p.6) and categorizes them into five major areas namely, board, card, athletic, children's and computer. He then goes on to describe the game as a closed formal system (only games with explicit rules) which is a subjective, representative subset of reality. He elaborates on this systemic understanding when he says that in a game several constituent parts interact amongst themselves in variable complex and unpredictable ways at the time of play and this dynamic state of interaction can be called a system (Crawford, 1984 p. 6-15). Costikyan takes the systemic understanding forward when he understands the system as an interactive structure that requires participants to struggle to reach an end goal. He also characterizes games as endogenous sites of meaning making (Costikyan, 2002).

Salen and Zimmerman (2004), Jesper Juul (2005) and Taylor (2006) open up an understanding of video games as rule-bound systems. Salen and Zimmerman view video games as rule based systems which allow for players to engage in artificial conflicts in order to achieve favorable outcomes. Juul further complicates this understanding when he calls the act of gameplay a half real one, using the vivid picture of slaying a dragon he characterizes the in-game act as a "half-real" achievement, where the slaying of the dragon is a virtual act but the adherence to the rules of the game to perform the feat makes it real (Juul, 2005). He understands video games as rule-centric systems with variable outcomes and players put in effort in order to obtain a favorable outcome. He acknowledges that players are emotionally attached to the end-outcomes and also accepting of the fact that in games the final outcomes are at times negotiable amongst the participants (Juul, 2005).

The systemic understanding of games though functionality was critiqued by Malaby when he pointed out that games weren't merely systems but were sites of processual repetitive acts (Malaby, 2007). These acts are replete with social, dynamic and recursive processes and over time the repetition can lead to the formation of newer meanings and practices amongst players thus allowing for games to reconfigure themselves. Malaby points to the inability of rules to capture the fluid, ephemeral essence of the game. Malaby in his definition exhorts researchers to not define what a game is but to try and understand how games are and thus situate the question in the realms of social sciences and humanistic, hermeneutic approaches (Malaby, 2007). The processual approach allows for in-game actions and the erstwhile hard-coded rules to be open to interpretation for both the players engaged with the games and scholars seeking to study them.

Despite the availability of three distinctive perspectives that allow us to understand video games: as activities, systems or processual social constructs, none of these overtly addresses Wittgenstein's notion that games (Spiel he calls them) are analytically undefinable (Wittgenstein, 1953). While Wittgenstein arrives at this understanding in the process of grappling with language and meaning making-- a concept he calls language games, --Aarseth and Calleja acknowledge that the inability of games studies to arrive at a concrete definition of the object of their study is a problem that constantly spurs researchers to arrive at a grand unified understanding of the term (Aarseth, Calleja, 2015).

Studying Games

Despite, escaping definition, games – in this case video games - have been around since the development of the Integrated Circuit. The Integrated Circuit was patented in 1959 by Jack Kilby who worked at Texas Instruments and by 1962, one of the first video games *Space War* was being played (Pias, 2013). The development of digital games happened right about the time modern computing was being conceived and has evolved steadily alongside the meteoric change that is the IT revolution. Five decades hence, the video game industry has grown in leaps and bounds and in terms of global revenue eclipses now the motion picture industry[3]. Today video games in some form or the other have become a part of our digital lives.

When one begins to chart academic studies on video games, it is interesting to note that a major chunk of research on the subject focuses on the possible link between playing video

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[3] The global video game revenues for the year 2016 were USD 91 Billion (SuperData, 2016) growing considerably from USD 71.3 Billion in 2015. The global box office revenues from movies was at USD 38.6 Billion (Motion Picture Association)

games and violent behavior. This is perhaps not surprising, given the preponderance of effects studies deriving from a positivist approach that attempt to link media consumption and behavior. The Payne Fund studies and their experimental nature were the earliest researches to be carried out on films and their audiences and they looked at answering questions of Violence and Film very similar to that of early video game studies.

The studies on violence formed the bed-rock of early video game research as several studies attempted to validate the popularly held belief that kids playing video games with violent content were more prone to raise semi-automatic rifles on living people in real life situation than their non-video game playing counterparts (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Dietz, 1998; Anderson et al, 2004 and Arriaga et. al 2006). Such studies extensively draw from Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Gerbner's theory of cultivation and his idea of enculturation. (Bandura, 1986; Gerbner,1986).

With time, counterarguments to this popular belief have emerged that draw from Aristotle's *Catharsis theory* in an interpretation very similar to Feshbach & Singer's 1971 study on television and aggression. The researchers making these arguments argue that players engaged in violent acts on video games are *purged* of all their malice and violence in the process and are part of a cathartic experience rather than feel more prone to violence as earlier suggested (Feshbach & Singer, 1971; Ferguson et al 2010). It is important to note that most of these studies on violence were conducted by psychologists and draw from an understanding of media that is very similar to that applied in theories such as the *Hypodermic Needle* based on the premise that audiences and users of content are passive consumers of messages and the same message has a uniform effect on everybody.

There are researchers on the other hand that look at video games as cultural artifacts and in this literature review, I would like to focus on this stream of research, while also using the work of Sherry Turkle to forge a connection between New Media Studies and video game studies. In her 1995 book *Life on the Screen*, Turkle asks questions about identity and the self by analyzing usage patterns of users of *Multi User Dungeons* (*MUDs*) and their derivatives the *MOOs*. She raises some interesting questions about identity when she looks at a male MUD user whose self-created Avatar in the *MUDspace* is a woman, pretending to be a man; a level of complexity that wouldn't be possible to appreciate in our offline lives (Turkle, 1995).

In another instance, she looks at a MUD scenario where in a group one of the users, after wresting control of a female player's character, went on to rape that character in the group even as the horrified owner of the character watched helplessly. A study focusing on violence would have attempted to analyze the behavior of the hacker and tried to understand the motivations that led to the act, but Turkle in this instance raises questions from another perspective as she attempts to understand the cause of the user's discomfort when the character is merely virtual. The questions she asks are not limited to *identity* and the *real-virtual* dichotomy alone but also provide insights into issues of *power* and *access*, aspects that tend to be not focused on by researchers who follow the effects-based approach (Turkle, 1995 p. 244).

Narratology vs Ludology

When one begins to encapsulate the initial attempts to understand video games as *cultural artefacts*, one notices that several researchers from fields like psychology, film studies, visual culture, literature and literary theory, computer sciences and Artificial Intelligence have

tried employing methods from their native fields in a bid to further the understanding of video games. The most prominent of these researchers belonged to the schools of literature and film studies (Aarseth, 2001). Scholars from the field of literature focused on the plot and narrative style that video games as a form had to offer. Researchers rooted in this tradition likened the hybrid nature of video games as a medium to a narrative form similar to what theatre had to offer (Murray, 1998; Aarseth, 2001). On the other hand, film and visual culture scholars viewed video games as an extension to their fields. They analyzed the aesthetics of video games and focused on the visual elements of the game; for instance, the way the cut-scenes in video games were visually depicted (Frasca, 1999).

Janet Murray looks at the possibilities that video games offer and notes that their fluid nature allows the player to a certain extent determine not only how the game is played but also the way the narrative unfolds. By looking at the agency on offer she proposes the creation of a holographic platform for theatrical performance. In her work *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Murray defines the *Holodeck* as a virtual dais in cyberspace on which users can perform by logging in from around the world. While the concept certainly breaks the spatial barriers that limits the conventional theatre experience it could also be seen as reductionist as it limits the potential of video games as a platform to merely a medium for storytelling (Murray, 1998). Those who attempt to study the storytelling aspects of video games are called *Narratologists.* In short, *Narratology* as an approach views video games as one among a plethora of platforms for storytelling and is a central pillar of the study of *interactive narratives.*

In contrast to the narrative approach to video games, emerging video game researchers at the turn of the century realised that there was the need of a newer approach to study the medium. The new approach to be developed was to be such that, it did not attempt to limit the inherently interactive and fluid nature of the video game in order to study it alongside with conventional media forms. By realizing that video games couldn't be studied like conventional linear texts, these emerging scholars began the pursuit to understand the fun and interactive elements in the domain of simulation, which video games could render for their players and thus began to call themselves Ludologists (Frasca, 1999). Frasca defines ludology as the study of video games that focuses on the interactive, fun and play elements (the combination of the three called "ludic") and the belief that they are not held in place by the game's narrative structure (Frasca, 1999 p.2).

Espen Aarseth is often credited for the use of the term "Ergodic" in line with video games, Aarseth in his 1997 book, used the term in order to not only define video games as a post-modern medium but to also suggest that their fluid and user-controlled nature transcended the boundaries of the term "interactivity" that was a core feature of other new media technologies (Aarseth, 1997; Aarseth, 2001; Aarseth, 2006). Aarseth understands Cybertext and video games as forms of ergodic literature where the reader/player must put in non-trivial effort to traverse through the text (Aarseth, 1997). Gonzalo Frasca in his 1999 paper not only defined Ludology but thundered a rallying cry against the Narratologists to spark off an intense debate between the two schools of thought. The debate between the two ideas has raged on since the Ludologists (prominently Aarseth, Frasca, Juul & Calleja) began to point out the limitations of the narratological approach to game studies.

Aarseth especially has been very vocal in his work against the narratological approach, criticising it on several accounts and stating that the true essence of playing a video game lies in the experience of controlling the in-game *Avatar* and engaging with the various features that the content has to offer rather than to merely play in order to unravel the plot (Aarseth, 2004). Jesper Juul on the other hand though not as critical as Aarseth and Frasca, in his book *Half Real* brought forth some observations that had defied explanation by the narratologists. The role played by *rules* in games was fundamental in his arguments. Juul calls playing a video game a "half-real" act; he explains it by noting that while the act of slaying a dragon in the video game is a *fictional element* of the medium, the conditions that must be followed while killing the dragon are real (Juul, 2005). The rules (something that the narratologists didn't account for), Juul feels are instrumental in not only creation of the game space but the entire game experience.

In the years since, video game researchers have employed a variety of methods and approaches to explore games, using either a ludonarratological approach that emerged from the previously mentioned debate, or other frameworks that offer a more holistic and understanding of the medium that goes beyond the binary of structure (narrative) or form (ludic).

Schools and approaches to game studies

In the search for literature that studied video games as cultural artefacts and moved beyond the seminal debate of narratology and ludology, I was able to identify certain core themes and approaches that allowed me to group and classify the work on the basis of geographical locations.

The Copenhagen School

Ludology is the term that lay the foundation of the Danish school of thought in video game studies and it still binds scholars such as Aarseth, Frasca, Juul and Calleja. Aarseth, the foremost and most prolific of the group laid down the gauntlet with his 1997 book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* and gained further popularity with a 2001 article which can be likened to a global announcement that led to the creation of the field of game studies. Gonzalo Frasca, a Uruguayan famed for coining the term Ludology was Aarseth's doctoral student and this association has been instrumental in the forging of a strong ludic perspective among Danish academics studying video games. Another prominent scholar in this tradition is Jesper Juul, author of *Half Real* and known for his reinterpretation of the magic circle as a puzzle piece[4] is of Danish origin, as is Gordon Calleja who suggests the use of terms such as engagement and incorporation (instead of immersion) and known for his six-point framework to study immersion[5] is affiliated to the ITU in Copenhagen.

Apart from the ludic perspective the Danish school is also one that focuses on a medium based study of video games. Their counter-arguments with the narratology school and their desire to arrive at a holistic understanding of the play elements in games has seen them grapple with a variety of ideas in the last decade. They have carried forward the work of early game scholars such as Caillois, Huizinga, Salen and Zimmerman (Calleja, 2013) as they try to arrive at a concrete explanation/solution to the iconic Wittgensteinian conundrum: what is a game? (Wittgenstein, 1953; Aarseth & Calleja, 2009). The wide range of work from

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[4] Juul reconfigures the magic circle as a puzzle-piece, an understanding that breaks the rigidity and absoluteness that categorize Salen and Zimmerman's understanding. (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). The puzzle piece can then be understood as part of a larger whole and in its permeable nature allows for contexts and non-game elements to both affect the magic circle and be a part of play. (Juul, 2009)

[5] Calleja studies immersion and player engagement on a macro and a micro level. He unpacks the video game as a medium into six distinct elements and analyses immersion across each of them. (Calleja, 2007)

the Danish school has provided emerging researchers with a variety of perspectives, typologies to comprehend and analyze video games both as a medium and an interactive platform (Aarseth et al, 2003; Aarseth, 2007; 2012).

The Danish school however strictly adheres to its understanding of games and in its approach often overlooks crucial elements of gameplay like the role of the narrative, plot, in-game characters, the players and the players' emotional connect with the games they play. Aarseth in particular, has taken a rather myopic view of games—for instance when he insisted that game studies must look at *Lara Croft's Tomb Raider* series (a series that was globally considered over-sexualized) as just another game without reference to its elements, and merely analyze the challenges that the game expects the players to overcome (Aarseth, 2004), a view that has since been heavily criticized (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). The desire of the Ludologists to remain free of context and a constant striving to stay unbiased in their understanding of video games as a medium must be construed as one of their biggest limitations, as there is a noticeable lack of commentary from Copenhagen on issues such as *#Gamergate[6]* and the skewed gender ratio in game development and amongst players at large.

The Finnish Perspective

The Finnish perspective of video games is largely centered around their understanding of video games as systems. The systemic approach to studying video games is well defined by

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[6] #Gamergate is a movement that demands not only a fair and equitable representation of women in video games but also challenges current representations of female characters in game-worlds especially over-sexualization and depiction of women characters as passive observers and recipients of players' in-game actions.

Stenros in his doctoral dissertation titled *Playfulness, Play and Games* as he views them as artificial rule-bound systems which differ from ordinary events where people interested to obtain favorable outcomes engage in contests which lead to quantifiable outcomes (Stenros, 2015). This systemic understanding can be viewed as an amalgamation of several key ideas that have been used to define games over the years ranging from Huizinga to Juul. Key game studies researchers from Finnish academia include Eskelinen whose contributions to game studies are in parlance with Aarseth's as he foresees the need for the nascent field's connection with scholars such as Huizinga, Caillois and also worries about imminent intrusions and attempts to colonize the field by other established, organized fields of study (Eskelinen, 2001).

Finnish academics since Eskelinen have worked on various aspects of games/gaming but the central theme in most of their research views the video game as a product. Their pioneering research on mobile gaming is a consequence of the *Nokia* influence (Osborn, 2014) which has been furthered by the success of indigenous game tiles like *Angry Birds* (Rovio). Finnish researchers are amongst the first to study the influence of high speed internet on the video game industry (Toivonen, Sotamaa, 2010) and identify and study the evolution of the video game from a product to a service (Stenros & Sotamaa, 2009; Tyni & Sotamaa, 2011). Their systemic understanding of games has allowed them to develop a variety of frameworks that have fed back to the industry and streamlined the game development process. Models such

as Korhonen et al.'s PLEX[7] model (Korhonen at al., 2009) and Ermi & Mayra's Sci Model[8] (Ermi & Mayra, 2005) have helped game developers design for a fluid user/gaming experience by deconstructing immersion and engagement into smaller manageable levels. Korhonen and Koivisto have also developed the heuristic analysis framework that allows for developers to test new games on parameters of playability (a derivative of the more popular HCI term 'usability') (Korhonen & Koivisto, 2006).

However, Finnish scholars haven't been limited to the systemic perspective as scholars such as Paavilainen, Hamaari, Kinnunen and Saarenpää have begun to study players' in-game contexts and gamer behavior (Paavilainen, 2009; Paavilainen 2016; Hamaari et al. 2017). Their early understanding of the freemium game economy and the free2play genre of video games in conjunction with the understanding of player's purchase behavior of in-game content has provided game studies scholars with valuable insights into increasingly popular mobile game dimension.

The American Approach

The American approach in studying video games is more contextual in nature and borrows heavily from the social sciences and humanist perspectives. Scholars such as Consalvo, Taylor, Shaw, Galloway (Galloway, 2006), Williams (Williams, 2005), Boellstorff and Yee have provided us with alternate ways of grappling with the post-modern nature of the

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[7] The Playful Experiences framework helps developers understand, analyze and design experiences that are playful interactions. By providing the developers with 22 categories of such experiences it allows them to mix and match specific experiences at specific instances to design an overall immersive experience.

[8] The Sci Model understands gameplay experience as an escapist experience, and suggests three kinds of immersion namely; sensory, challenge and imaginary. The Sci-model allows for developers to break down their content into the kinds of immersion they offer and allows them to test for the same.

medium and take into account player experiences and thought processes. Yee's approach to understanding motivations of people engaging with MMORPGs not only suggests improvements to Bartle's seminal categories of players (Bartle, 1996) but also uses factor analysis and thick descriptions to encapsulate player's vibrant journeys in massive virtual worlds (Yee, 2006). Boellstorff, an anthropologist, suggests the use of ethnography in video-game research and while calling game studies a ludicrous discipline suggests three ways of understanding video game culture in conjunction with the multifaceted nature of everyday life (Boellstorff, 2006). His work as an ethnographer on Second Life can be viewed as a successor to Turkle's seminal understanding of the Mudspace (Turkle, 1995), as he understands communities of play and the virtual self. (Boelstorff, 2011; 2015; Pearce et al. 2011)

Taylor on the other hand has been associated with the Copenhagen school but has always adopted a more processual approach to the field and had been prolific in her work with gamers, players and gamer identities, exploring issues of gender, embodiment and the complex space between the offline and online realms by studying expansive MMORPG worlds like *World of Warcraft* and *Everquest* (Taylor, 2002; 2003; 2006; 2009). Her recent work has also begun to analyze the professionalization of the video game industry and the emerging trend of e-sports. Her insights on serious play and the emergence of *pro-players* have been instrumental in furthering the understanding of the term *gamer* (Taylor, 2012)*.

Consalvo is widely known for her work on cheating among video game players and her insights into the player psyche and the larger video game community as players defend/justify their use of workarounds, i.e., methods to circumvent game-rules, to their

advantage (Consalvo, 2009a). Her proclamation "There is no magic circle"[9] questions the rigidity and overly formalist structure of the concept. She also uses cheating amongst players to understand players' frustrations, limitations in-game and also understand their ludic ambitions, actions and activities (Consalvo, 2009b). Her work with gender and sexuality in video-game spaces is diverse and provides unique entry points that question not only the stereotypical mass-mediated image of gamers but also highlights the deeply rooted gender-bias in the global video game player-base (Consalvo, 2003; 2006; 2012).

Adrienne Shaw's work is also centered around understanding gaming from a cultural perspective as she seeks to find a place and voice for the marginalized in-game and in wider gaming communities (Shaw, 2009; 2010). Her work questions the trivialization of players' gaming pursuits and attempts to understand players' processes of identity construction (Shaw, 2012). Her work responds to issues such as *#gamergate* and seeks to situate LGBT communities in the popular mainstream understanding of gamers by positing that video game players experience race, gender and sexuality concurrently and she then uses this understanding to study issues pertaining to representation, thereby questioning the broader assumptions of the video game industry (Shaw, 2015).

The diverse work that has emerged from the American approach is clearly indicative of their willingness to look beyond the medium of video games and further their understanding by situating their work in the boundaries of other fields such as anthropology, communication, feminist studies, the social sciences and humanistic schools of thought. Their willingness to

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[9] The Magic Circle can be best defined as the membrane that demarcates the physical/offline world from the game world. A barrier that a player must cross in order to begin play and in the process, experience the magic of play as during play the space is governed by new rules and acquires new meanings of time and space.

understand the field as a cross-roads discipline has enabled them to arrive at a complicated but holistic understanding of concepts such as gameplay, gaming identities, representation and embodiment thus indicative of the massive progress of the processual approach espoused in their work.

Compelling work in game studies has also emerged from Australia where researchers like Apperley and Humphreys have proposed new approaches. Apperley suggests the use of genres in video games to arrive at a critical understanding of the medium while also suggesting the need for concepts such as gaming literacy, gaming capital (Apperley, 2006; Apperley, 2009; Apperley & Walsh, 2012; Walsh & Apperley, 2009; Apperley & Beavis, 2013). Humphreys studies the MMOG (Massively Multiplayer Online Games) space to understand in-game concepts such as governance and also seeks to understand the value of gamer created content (Humphreys et al. 2005; Humphreys, 2005; Humphreys, 2008; Banks & Humphreys, 2008).

Understanding the in-game scenario

The debate between the Narratologists and the Ludologists has been key to determining the research that has happened in the area of video game studies. However, over a period of time the debate has tended toward unidimensionality, thus somewhat detrimental to the field at large. Lindley in particular feels that it is difficult to discount the effect of the story and plot in the video game if one were to understand gaming experience fully and ideas like Ludonarratological dissonance[10] only strengthen Lindley's argument (Lindley, 2005;

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[10] Hocking understands Ludonarratological dissonance as a feeling that the player experiences when he/she notices a lack of congruence between the ludic and narrative elements of a game. Hocking illustrates the feeling by describing when a player uses a character to gun down scores of enemies beating all odds to reach a narrative point where the character is killed by a single bullet. An indication that the ludic resilience the character enjoyed doesn't translate to the game's narrative dimension.

Hocking, 2009). I would like to however steer this review away from this debate and look at key terms such as *play* and *game experience* as they are more within the scope of this study.

This section looks at the Magic Circle (Salen & Zimmrman, 2004), The Magic Cycle and Recursive Space (Wood, 2012) in order to provide an understanding of how sites of play have been understood by games study scholars. The Magic Circle provides us an understanding as to how sites of play transform at the time of play and provides us insights into the new meanings that are created. The Magic Cycle offers us an understanding of gameplay by breaking it down into specific instances and offering us a hermeneutic insight into players' ludic acts. Recursive space gives us an understanding of the reconfigurations of game space and how players' respond to them thus enabling us to analyze specific in-game actions.

Most academic papers on video games often begin by first attempting define the key term *play*. The term play has been heavily used by academics from various fields in the last century. However, not all uses of play have been in line with the everyday understanding which largely refers to the sense of being amused and having fun, both during and immediately after the act of play. Johan Huizinga's 1955 book *Homo Ludens* attempted to understand play in this respect (Huizinga, 1955). His work has been carried forward by Roger Caillois in his book *Man Play and Games* and more recently by Salen and Zimmerman (Caillois, 1958/2001; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004).

Caillois in particular is extremely rigid in defining play (a trait he seems to pick up from Huizinga). He arrives at a definition of play by defining all that is *not* a playful activity. He says an act of 'play; is corrupted on one of the six possible grounds, Firstly, if it ceases to be

a free act and the players aren't playing of their own free volition. Also, an act cannot be considered to be a playful one if it isn't separate from real life occurrences. He extends the disqualification also to all acts that have a certain fixed outcome before the activity begins. Fourthly, Caillois feels that the activity cannot be unproductive, he adds to this by saying that all acts that are not regulated cannot be playful acts either. Finally, Caillois stresses that the act of play must be fictive. These six conditions have been heavily critiqued, as one would be hard-pressed to find an act that does adequate justice on all six counts (Caillois, 1958/2001).

Callois then moves on to classify playful acts into four broad categories namely, *Agon, Alea, Mimicry and Ilinx.* Caillois defines *Agon* as a competitive from of play where the player tries to win and the rules ensure that no participant enjoys any advantage. Caillois observes that in such situation players rely on training and discipline to achieve a beneficial outcome. The second category is *Alea* which is purely chance based and the player cannot determine the outcome of such activities in any way; games of dice and the roulette are good examples. Caillois' *mimicry* is an attempt to explain theatre, drama and other such activities that might be an aspect of a game. Finally, *Ilinx* is Caillois' classification for activities that provide exhilaration, like vertigo: for example, bungee jumping or experiencing a roller coaster ride (Caillois, 1958/2001). Janet Murray in her work borrows from Caillois as she views play as an act of mimesis and something that is integral to the human psyche. Murray believes that this *mimetic* aspect of play has a very crucial role in human development right from the youngest days as much of what children learn is through mimicking the acts of adults around them. (Murray, 2006).

Moving away from Huizinga and Caillois' understanding of play, other scholars have also used the term in other contexts over the years. Gadamer for instance uses play's anti-subjective emphasis and medial nature to explain one's experience of truth (Gadamer, Truth and Method p. 103 and 105). Jacques Derrida on the other hand, uses *play* to challenge *absolutes* and *totalization* and for a variety of reasons across contexts. However, in his large body of work, Derrida doesn't seem to have put together a concrete definition of how he conceptualizes the term (Galloway, 2006).

Though there is a considerable body of work around the term *play*, this review will have to refrain from summarizing all of it as the main interest of the study is the players' video game experiences rather than an understanding of play *per se*. In a hope to understand what players of video games experience when they are engaged with the medium several researchers have endeavored to build models and theories. This section of the review begins with a look at the *Magic Circle*.

The magic circle was proposed by Salen and Zimmerman and is a model that has emerged out of Huizinga and Caillois's perspectives on play and games (Huizinga 1955; Caillois, 1958/2001). The magic circle has been conceptualized around four core ideas. The first being that entry into the circle is voluntary for players. Secondly, the circle in itself is self-sufficient as it is created on its own and ends on its own and isn't governed by anyone or thing. The third idea explains how the magic circle is different from ordinary life spatially and temporally, as the site of play acquires a new meaning when play begins and the time during play gains a new dimension. The fourth concept centers around how the magic circle is governed by rules that do not apply to daily life, thereby creating new meanings in the

course of play within the magic circle as rules, space and time coalesce to enable the game being played (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). The need for a concept like the *magic circle* was felt when scholars attempted to demarcate the site of play from everyday life and to understand what happens in it when play begins. Salen and Zimmerman in their conceptualization strongly feel that the magic of play is felt only once somebody enters the circle and they make clear cut distinctions between ordinary lives and play making the borders between the two activities impermeable (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). However, the Magic Circle as a concept has been heavily critiqued, Consalvo in Particular calls it static and overly formalist. She points out to the fact that the magic circle is at best a structure that allows for initiating gameplay but one we must look beyond in order to understand how rules, time and space acquire new meanings at the time of gameplay (Consalvo, 2009b).

Arsenault & Perron's *Magic Cycle,* unlike the magic circle, does not look at game space but aims to understand *gaming activity*. Their understanding of playing a video game in this framework is that of a continuous loop between player input and computer/programme output. The framework draws from both gameplay and the algorithms of the game itself (Arsenault & Perron, 2008).

The model they have visualised has three interconnected spirals, which run against a time axis. On the time scale, they have three specific segments, *the game opening, the launch window* and *the exit window.* In terms of game activity, a spiral each is devoted to *Gameplay, Narrative* and lastly the *Interpretative* spiral (Arsenault & Perron, 2008: 8).

On unpacking the framework, one realises that the model is a ludo-narratological one as it looks at both gameplay and narrative and their respective spirals are not mutually exclusive.

The third spiral they suggest is an interesting one, called the *Hermeneutic Spiral*. This trajectory is about gamers' reflections and contemplations on their gameplay activities. The players' thoughts in this process could range from the content of the game to the way the players play in the game worlds or any theme that connects to the gameplay experience (Arsenault & Perron, 2008: 9).

The last crucial theory in this section is Aylish Wood's notion of *Recursive Space.* She uses recursive space to define the act of playing in a video game as a continuous series of moves where the player attempts to reconfigure game space with his/her actions. These reconfigurations are often moves that have been carefully thought out, at times well in advance. In a game like chess the first move made by a player dictates the entire course of a match and every move that follows is not only in response but also in accordance with the first move.

Similarly, in video games the player makes a move; which could be anything from merely looking around in the game space or firing a volley of bullets at a non-playable character (NPC) controlled by the Artificial Intelligence (A.I.). While it would be easier to understand the act of playing against a computer as an action against a set of scripted decision trees that developers have embedded in the game's underlying code; it is more holistic to understand the AI as an opponent. In sessions of game play developers have realized that players often are unpredictable in their approaches to in-game challenges and also look for their opponents to be worthy and unpredictable, here game developers have begun to tap into the promise of Artificial intelligence and Machine Learning as newer games use fuzzy and probabilistic logic to provide a worthwhile challenge. The game changes accordingly in

response to these actions and thus begins a loop of alternative space re-configurations from the AI/opponent in response to the player's actions and the player in turn reacts to the AI/opponent's reactions. This loop continues till an impasse is reached when one of the two participants can no longer reconfigure the space (in case of Chess it could be a Checkmate/Stalemate and in case of video games either the level has been cleared or the player has seen the dreaded Game Over screen). The recursive space concept is a fairly uncomplicated one and is something that can be felt in every gaming activity where the player's actions determine the result of the activity (excludes games based on chance, what Caillois calls Alea like dice, gambling etc.) (Caillois 1958/2001).

Flow, Immersion and Engagement

Another idea that the Ludologists have consistently pursued/emphasized upon is the players' state of *immersion*. The concept of immersion is defined by most Ludologists using Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *flow*. Key to the experience of flow and the Zen state is Csikszentmihalyi's understanding of the term where he understands the state of being in flow as a heightened experience that he compares to the athletes' in the zone, mystics' ecstasy and artists' aesthetic rapture and refers to the full involvement of flow as the "excellence in life." Instances where people experience the Zen state are labeled by him as moments of intense living that are dispersed against the dull background of everyday life (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

The Ludologists posit that while playing a game players enter a *Zen* like state, where their engagement levels with the game are extremely high and the players are often oblivious of the physical world around them (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Flow amongst players while

interacting with games is more common in contrast to "normal" or routine activities of the everyday, the interaction with(in) a game requires the player to engage at multiple levels and enter a state where his/her skills are completely involved in overcoming a challenge while adhering to the rules. Csikszentmihalyi also points out that the person seeks constant moments of flow by either mastering new skills or increasing the difficulty of the challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). It is important to note that in theory, this heightened flow/Zen state is such that once people experience it, they will always strive to experience the intensity and exhilaration repeatedly (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

Gordon Calleja, known for his intensive exploration of immersion in games, suggests the use of a six-point framework to study engagement on a macro and a micro level. He unpacks the video game as a medium into six distinct elements (tactical, performative, affected, shared, narrative and spatial) and analyses immersion across each of the elements. Calleja does point out that when a player is playing he wouldn't necessarily be able to distinguish between the six elements and would experience the involvement as a unified cognitive sensation. In the conclusion to his study Calleja suggests replacing the term immersion with the terms involvement and incorporation thus reducing the role of the narrative from the key reason of playing a video game (as suggested by the Narratologists) to one of the six elements that construct gaming experience as a whole (Calleja, 2007).

Concepts like flow, immersion and engagement can be used to understand what players go through while playing a game. These frames provide us not only with unique insights that help understand the magic during play and allows for us to understand the new meanings

space and time acquire once play begins but also chart how players intuitively adapt and internalize them.

Studying the Player

The video game is a truly post-modern medium (Lister, 2003), not because it is impossible to arrive at a fixed text and experience for analysis but also because each individual gamer plays a crucial role in the creation and dissemination of content which is unique to how he/she engages with the medium. The problem of studying such medium lies in the inability to use a single approach to understand the complete gaming experience (Aarseth, 2006) The complete gaming experience can be understood as the process which begins much before an instance of gameplay, it includes the decision making process which led to the player choosing a particular game over the others available, it then includes the entire process from acquisition of the game, to instance of first play, repeated play and the sessions of reflection and introspection post-play. The ludological approach focuses on the gaming dimension alone whereas the narratologists look at the role of gamers as mere steps to be followed in the progression of the plot but neither of them independently can convey the complete gaming experience (Lindley, 2005).

It would seem that the tools offered by ethnography, if applied with reflexivity, would be ideal to grapple with the problem of capturing and understanding gaming experience holistically. The problem is however more complex, especially when concepts of immersion and engagement come into play. Quite a few gaming scholars believe that it is nearly impossible to use an ethnographic approach to understand gamers' experiences as they are

too strongly involved and immersed in the magic circle (Huizinga, 1955; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) to think about games critically and articulate this thinking.

However, studies have shown that one never is in a constant state of total immersion when they are inhabiting the game-space and the instances of total immersion are at best fleeting (Brown and Cairns, 2004).

The argument for using an ethnographic method is further strengthened if we borrow Arsenault & Perron's framework of the Magic Cycle which looks at the context not only during a game but what happens before the game commences and after a game has ended. The model's utility in studying repeated gaming cycles makes it possible for gamers to have windows of thought where they think about the video game critically. These time periods of thought would be repeated each time he/she plugged out of a video game and before they plugged in again for the magic cycle to resume (Arsenault and Perron, 2008), thereby, providing us with a conscious thinking gamer who would be ideal for ethnographic research.

There is a new wave of gaming researchers today, scholars who have not only understood video games from the vantage points of production, programming and simulation but have themselves also negotiated and engaged with video games on an almost daily basis for most of their lives. One such scholar, Brendan Keogh, looks at how using ethnography one can treat *video game experience* as a *text* in itself. He calls it "a composite fluid text" (Keogh, 2014), whose essence, I suggest, can be captured in the to and fro movement between players' offline existences and the various cybernetic existences they multiply inhabit in game spaces.

For such an approach to work there is a need to situate video games and player experiences in a frame of *everydayness* and understand players' acts of playing as not distinct individual acts but as fragments that constitute a larger *practice*. Practice is an exciting concept that Couldry traces to Wittgenstein and his studies on language where he views language as a toolkit, and understands it as not an agreement of opinions but an agreement in forms of life among the speakers of the language (Wittgenstein, 1978; Couldry, 2012). Both Bourdieu and Schatzki have appreciated Wittgenstein's belief that that philosophy has failed to not only theorize but also understand everyday life. Wittgenstein's idea of practice has been extended by Bourdieu as a philosophical argument to structural anthropologists like Levi-Strauss who felt that the social world was like a text ready to be interpreted. Bourdieu instead suggests the need to carefully examine the pre-conditions that lead to actions, in other words he asks to understand the system that produces the conditions that cause the practice to exist an idea he builds upon to propose the more complex "Habitus "(Bourdieu, 1977: 110; 1992).

Schatzki on the other hand defines the term *practice* as a collection of interleaved actions which in combination result in the emergence of not only a specialized understanding but also enables the creation of well-defined rules and structures to ensure the safeguarding of these rules. He then goes on to classify practices into two categories, *integrative* and *dispersed*. Schatzki views practices that are clearly delimited and integrated in the social order as integrated; farming and cooking would be good examples of such practices. He however defines *dispersed practices* as those that cannot be clearly defined but are part of other practices cross-cutting in our lives, like following rules, explaining things or imagining ideas (Schatzki, 1996:91-92).

This approach of integrated and dispersed practice has been applied to video games by Roig et al, who look at how playing video games is socially organised (Integrated practice) and also how this practice is related to other practices (Dispersed practice). They feel that video games as an integrated practice (players engaging with video games) are not only constructing communities with set goals but also play a key role in the production and re-production of symbolic worlds. They also describe video games as a medium that enables the social construction of the terms *real* and *non-real*. As a dispersed practice, video games introduce a change in the way we think of the terms *represented reality* and *imagination*, and these scholars suggest that the understanding of dispersed practices can allow us to explore the interconnections between other media and video games to gauge the various ways in which we produce and consume audio-visual representations (Roig et al, 2009).

However, one productive way to employ the practice approach would involve borrowing from Couldry's other key idea which does not look at what media forms do to people but instead attempts to comprehend what people do to the media products they consume (Couldry, 2012). The combination of the two perspectives offers a new and exciting set of hermeneutic possibilities especially when used in conjunction with an ethnographic approach that seeks to study video game experience in a framework of Wood's recursive space thereby sharpening the focus on the 'everydayness' of playing video games.

<u>Research Questions</u>

The study aimed to gain a holistic understanding of gaming in an *everyday* sense from the point of view of the gamers. It was an attempt to understand gamers' consumption of video game content and their engagement with the game. Its approach borrowed from the framework of *practice* proposed by Nick Couldry which looks at *not* what media products do to consumers but at what *consumers do to their media products.*

The purpose of the study was to understand and arrive at a *culture of gaming* in an Indian context by capturing players' experiences with video games from a participant pool of video game players from urban India. The study used the following broad questions to arrive at a holistic picture of video game experience which as the literature suggested was paramount for an adequate understanding of an everyday gaming culture and its practices.

1. How to identify and understand gaming practices, behaviors and attitudes that are instrumental in the creation of a core gaming experience?
   This question focused on issues of access and agency in both an intellectual and material context and in the process, was able to critically analyze the social networks (both online and offline) built by players.

2. What are the ways in which gamers enter their various *game-worlds* in a physical/psychological sense and how does this act of entry *affect* their other lives?

3. To arrive at a better understanding of players' negotiations with their video games and understand gaming experience by capturing the entire journey of entering into a game world and the experience of play followed by the logging out and analyzing re-entry into the game world.

This question did not only provide us with a clearer understanding of a single act of play as an isolated frame but also provided us with slices of context that could be used to identify and demarcate the various elements of the core gaming experience.

4. How does the act of gaming and play then become a practice and fit into the *complex fabric* that is, the everyday lives of gamers?

Underlying all these questions is the notion of context: what is it about the spaces and tools that these players use that draws specifically from their location in the Indian economy and cultural landscape? Given this interest in building a holistic understanding, the study drew on a variety of qualitative tools. The next chapter describes the methodology used to explore these questions.

Chapter - 2

Building Tools to Map the Ludic Everyday

This study seeks to situate the experience of game play in the everyday lives of players, and the various interactions between their world(s) of play and the contextual factors of technology, family, micro-economy, etc. In this chapter I outline the notion of the everyday and the ethnographic approach that I have used in the study. This chapter also discusses the synthesis of a theoretical framework that was used to holistically capture everyday gaming experience and the various methods and research instruments used in the data collection process. Finally, I reflect on the process of data collection and discuss the analysis the data was subjected to.

<u>Gaming and Everyday</u>

The term everyday has been understood and used in various ways but one of the earliest and most popular theorizations is Plato's where he posits the everyday as a counter to fields such as philosophy and science, fields that have been producers of knowledge in their attempts to provide us with ever-lasting truth, fields he called *episteme*. The everyday however he understood as a site of incoherent meaning-making where endless repetitive acts and rituals used common sense to formulate general opinions, knowledge he called *Doxa*. Plato wasn't too keen on Doxa for its lack of expert-oriented analysis.

Duncum conceptualizes the everyday as a mundane existence, one where neither momentous nor extraordinary happenings dent/alter the constant reproduction of life; an existence that sacrifices new ways of thinking and acting by focusing on the need to maintain life as we know it. He understands such an existence as one bound to the present moment

where actors are non-reflexively immersed in the "immediacy of current experiences and activities." He concludes his argument by pointing out that in the everyday, knowledge generation often involves participating in playful and frivolous acts as it is often gathered from peers and fellow participants rather than Plato's experts (Duncum, 2002).

Owing to the post-modern and fluid nature of video games as a medium most players chart individual ludic journeys that are exclusive and personal and the everyday frame provides researchers with exciting entry-points to attempt a confluence of unique journeys and arrive at a broader, holistic and meaningful understanding of gaming culture at large. Apperley in his 2009 book *Gaming Rhythms* examines the embedded aspect of digital game play by situating it in the everyday life of players and believes that every instance of game play is in relation to the global digital game ecology and is enacted through a specific culture of use that is drawn for the players' everyday lives. He uses the everyday as a key element to understand development of gaming practices in local contexts (Apperley, 2009 p. 18). Apperley's approach allows researchers to re-situate video game play from the realm of immersive experiences to a plane which allows for it to be deconstructed into everyday acts such as labor, tasks and pleasures (Apperley, 2009 p. 19).

Samuel Tobin builds on Apperley's frame of the everyday when he attempts to study the *Nintendo DS* and borrows from Anne Allison's *Millennial Monsters* by using "magic from the mundane" (Allison, 2006 p.186), a concept she (Allison) uses to counter Huizinga's understanding of magic in games by allowing for toys such as the *Tamagotchi* to reimagine social everydayness (Tobin, 2013 p.62). Tobin believes that it is essential for researchers to imagine the player of the *Nintendo DS* as one who is defined by the 'everydayness' of the

device, something that is built by constant use, proximity and portability and further leads the player to form and be part of newer social bonds by tapping into the imagined/virtual community that the platform offers. Tobin sees as key the ability of the key (Tobin, 2013 p.63).

Other studies such as Roig et. al's approach video games as a mode of practice (Roig et al, 2009) and are also suggestive of the need for an everyday frame to understand game-play and players' journeys so as to allow for the experiential to make its way into the broader understanding of game studies. After all, as Featherstone summarizes the work of other feminist scholars, the everyday is often ignored as a site of academic inquiry but it is from the everyday that we derive all our conceptualizations, definitions and understanding (Featherstone, 1995).

Using Ethnography in Game Studies

Studying players' negotiations with video games and their in-game experiences is a challenging task owing to the fluid nature of the medium and the ability of players to negotiate with the text in a non-linear fashion of their choosing. Thus, analyzing game experiences should not be restricted to merely capturing players' ludic actions as these may be just a small part of the larger jigsaw puzzle (borrowing from Juul's understanding of the puzzle piece). Comprehending what players do to their video games in the way Couldry suggests (Couldry, 2012), requires that we adopt a processual framework built on an understanding similar to Malaby's (Malaby, 2007). The resultant framework thereby allows us to situate instances of gameplay in a social realm by allowing us to explore how games are and providing us with interpretative and introspective lenses through which to view the

constant negotiation between ludic actions, adherence to in-game rules and actions that lead to a player's gaming pursuits.

Yee in his attempt to study players' motivations in MMORPG spaces uses factor-analysis of online survey data from a sample of 3,200 players. His approach though unique and rigorous seeks to detail and assess motivations amongst players and in the process, does not provide a detailed or rich understanding of what video games mean to their players and does not offer insights into how repeated acts of play have affected players' offline lives and identities. A holistic understanding of game play and its constituent elements such as game, gamer and player, thus seems to necessitate a processual, socially situated approach.

Boellstorff in his understanding of game studies furthers the idea that gaming culture can be understood in three different ways; the first of these aims to study game cultures (Boellstorff, 2006). He points out that most large games have ceased to exist as simple games but are meta-verses (he studies Second Life as such) where a lot of smaller games are collated. He notes that using rules and programing code to study such meta-verses is obsolete and researchers must seek to either study the relationships that are forged between the player and the meta-verse and the physical offline world. The other approach he suggests is to study meta-verses in their own contextual frames thus, studying the virtual sites as coherent systems of meaning making and practice. Secondly, he suggests examining the 'cultures of gaming' and exploring why players participate simultaneously in several meta-verses. He points out that studying the gamut of multi-verse negotiations will allow researchers to identify newer spatial constructs amongst players and newer player sub-cultures. Lastly, he suggests that gaming practices can also be understood as a confluence of their other media

practices and thus give us a more nuanced understanding of players --an approach he calls 'gaming of cultures' (Boellstorff, 2006).

All three of Boellstorff's approaches provide scholars of game studies with newer perspectives and as ways to address Malaby's concern that we must not seek to answer "what games are" but instead understand "how games are" (Malaby, 2007). Using an ethnographic approach to study players seems logical as it would allow researchers to work in culturally and contextually rich environments, and take into account gender, political or economic perspectives. Employing an ethnographic approach also allows us to grapple with what Boellstorff calls the 'crucial questions' of meaning, indexicality and significance (Boellstorff, 2006).

The rise of new media studies has allowed researchers to make use of several new tools and methods that allow data capture on platforms that use web 2.0. Analysis of comments and posts online for research has become a common practice. The other more exciting method is the development of cyberethnography (Rybas and Gajjala, 2007; Kuntsman, 2009). Rybas and Gajjala view ethnography as a "written representation of culture." They feel that this is achieved by observing the 'subjects' in their natural environment and that ethnography as a process allows the familiar to be rendered strange or vice-versa (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007 p. 3), making it possible to derive insights from it. They acknowledge that the younger generation's use of technology must not be viewed as mundane but rather as a starting point to understand the cultural and social construction of technologies.

 They seek to understand how research practices can transcend the experience of computer-mediated interaction without creating boundaries and ruptures in the creation and

maintenance of online and offline identities, thus developing an approach they describe as an "interactive methodology based on epistemologies of doing" (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007 p. 4). They emphasize the ability of their approach to look at how subjects/objects (interchangeable) use activities and forms such as typing, writing, image manipulation, creation of avatars, digital video and audio across a plethora of interfaces to produce themselves.

Rybas and Gajjala also argue that any ethnographic praxis in technology-mediated environments must include both the production and consumption of technological artifacts. In case of cyberethnography the researcher becomes a user and enters the digital environment to live, work, and to interact and manipulate the digital space to a certain extent. This philosophy of praxis focuses on 'doing' technology and building a techno -spatial environment (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007 p. 5-7). Cyberethnography offers us newer entry points to study players' in-game experiences compared to the approach used by Yee (Yee, 2006) but it does have some key shortcomings when applied to game studies. The difficulty of watching gamers/players in their native environments and the inability of researchers to be present at the site of meaning-making seems to limit the successful implementation of a processual approach. The players of video games are 'doing' the play (ludic effort) on par with the doers of technology from technology mediated environments as suggested by Rybas and Gajjala and the focus on the doing will ensure that players' efforts are not trivialized if we were to borrow their "praxis lens."

The need for researchers to study players in their physical and native environments has been articulated by several researchers. Flynn (2003) in particular argues that researchers should

study the various ways in which digital gaming technologies are used in players' homes/ preferred gaming locales to understand their social identities. Taylor et al also attempt to study their participants in a physical setting as they try to indicate that players' gaming activities are strongly dependent on contextual cues such as who they are playing with and against, where they are playing and when (Taylor et al, 2014). Ethnographic approaches allow the researcher to engage in everyday activities of meaning making on one end while also providing for these same activities to be recorded and analyzed.

Anthropological approaches to game studies have suggested the use of participant-observation as an effective method as it would provide a strong contextual and cultural foothold. Boellstorff notes that in an in-game instant the researcher cannot participate entirely nor can he/she observe at the same time. While this can be problematic at first the desired results will emerge from within this paradox. The researcher must be able to use the method to identify what participants say they do in-game and what they actually do (Boellstorff, 2006). In his 2012 book Boellstorff builds on this understanding and states that it is extremely important for a researcher to both observe and play at the same time; we cannot pick one over the other as they must both happen in parallel/conjunction (Boellstorff, 2012 p.69)

However, given that this study is an attempt to situate the medium of video games in a hermeneutical context of *everydayness* by borrowing from Couldry's *Practice* approach (Couldry, 2004), I was excited by the possibilities offered by an ethnographic approach. The right research tools (that amplify and complement the ethnographic approach) could enable the researcher to study the video game experience as a fluid text from the point of view of

the gamer as he/she oscillates in between the game world and the real, each time leaving a bit more of themselves in the game and while logging out or taking with them a few things to the offline world, leaving both worlds forever changed.

<u>Development of Synthetic Model</u>

A Ludo-narratological approach

A lot has happened in the field of game studies in the last two decades as video games have begun to be viewed as cultural texts and scholars have started to look beyond the behavioral studies perspective to study this new medium/cultural artefact. As with any emerging site of inquiry, game studies has become a point of confluence for scholars from various fields to draw on their respective disciplinary perspectives to understand the medium and create the first paths for future researchers to tread upon and deviate from.

Being a relatively new academic field, scholars have attempted to identify and rally around a crucial approach of thought, which Thomas Kuhn would have called a paradigm, to begin an era of applied research (Kuhn, 1969) that furthers the everyday understanding of the medium. In Kuhn's seminal work on paradigms he speaks of the paradigm state when a theory is recognized by its field as the best available explanation and is then applied in real world scenarios to overcome challenges. However, with game studies our search for a paradigm has met an ongoing debate on a narrative approach to video games called *Narratology* which views video games as one among a plethora of platforms for storytelling and a central pillar of the study of "interactive narratives" (Murray, 1998).

The opposing school of thought looks at video games as a medium which is more than merely interactive (best defined by Aarseth as *ergodic)* (Aarseth, 1997) and attempts to understand and study the play element of the video game (called *ludus*) rather than focusing on the plot and story (Juul, 2005). Scholars aligned with this approach feel that a narrative approach reduces video games to a mere story telling platform on the lines of other pre-digital media such as films (Aarseth), thus ignoring the possibilities (of play) that games actually open up for users. Proponents of this play-based approach call it *Ludology* (Frasca, 1998)*.*

The *narratological* approach attempts to study video games as cultural texts with a keen focus on the content, story and plot of the product. The ludological approach on the other hand attempts to not merely understand the *fun interactive elements* rendered by the domain of simulation but also attempts to arrive at a broad-meta theorization of it. This pre-dominant focus on generalization has prevented the Ludologists from escaping the trappings of the text in the traditional sense. Certainly, they do not study stories and plots but in their attempts to generalize game-play in video games they have begun to treat *ludic acts* as text.

The finer points of the *narrative-ludic* debate in game studies is not the aim of this study, which on the other hand attempts to go beyond this distinction. A similar sentiment is echoed by quite a few scholars who think the debate is counterproductive as neither approach has been able to provide a comprehensive understanding of the field. Instead, researchers have begun to employ a Ludo-narratological approach to arrive at a more complete understanding (Lindley, 2005). However, the problem remains that neither of these approaches attempts to study gamers' usage and consumption of video games (one, cannot use the traditional

dichotomy of production vs consumption here, as gamers like other new media users, consume and create content at the same time).

For a medium as *post-modern[11]* (Lister, 2003) as this it seems surprising that both the schools of thought have attempted to study games from the point of view of production rather than use and engagement. The only possible way to arrive at a more complete understanding is to move away from trying to build a grand theory of gaming and to situate the practice of gaming in a hermeneutical context of *everydayness*, drawing from Nick Couldry's *Practice* approach (Couldry, 2004).

Using the everyday as a frame of reference allows one to exploit ethnographic research methods to grapple with slices of context from gamers' lives to understand not what video games do to gamers but what gamers do to video games instead (borrowing from Nick Couldry's understanding of the Practice approach) thus providing us with a unique entry point (Couldry, 2004 & Roig et. al 2009) into the players' psyches. This entry point can be then used to analyze gaming experience as a text in itself, using to our advantage gamers' alternate existences in the game worlds they inhabit with their on-screen avatars and the real world they inhabit physically world (Keogh, 2014).

Couldry, Roig et al do not fit into the general mould of researchers this study must draw from as their approaches aren't ethnographic, however; the practice framework that they work with provides us a great meeting point to meld the findings of an ethnographic approach.

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[11] Owing to the high level of interactivity and the myriad ways in which players can engage with video games, they are an extremely fluid medium. The experience rendered at the time of engagements that is open to both the players' interpretations and their choices in-game, Fluidity, agency and a high level of interactivity make video games one of the most post-modern media forms at our disposal.

While Malaby, Taylor and Boellstorff would contend that ethnography would suffice, I strongly believe that for a medium as dynamic and fluid as video games we must explore all possible avenues and not restrict ourselves to the rigidities of established disciplines. This marriage of the theoretical and the ethnographic provides us with a canvas large enough to chart ludic journeys in their entirety.

Studying Gameplay and Game Experience

Most academic studies on gaming begin their understanding of video games by first attempting to look at the primary notion of play. The term play has been heavily used by scholars from various fields in the last century. However, not all uses of play have been in line with the everyday understanding which refers mostly to one being amused and having fun both during the act of play and after the act has ended. Johan Huizinga's 1938 book *Homo Ludens* attempted to understand play in this sense of fun and amusement. His work has been carried forward by Roger Caillois in his book *Man Play and Games* (Caillois, 1958/2001) and more recently by Salen and Zimmerman (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004).

Work on gamers' play experiences can be related to Aylish Wood's concept of *recursive space* (Wood, 2012). I would like to propose and apply a synthetic, collative methodological framework that uses this idea along with other pre-existing concepts like the *Magic Circle* (Salen& Zimmerman), The Magic Cycle (Arsenault &Perron, 2008) and Jesper Juul's understanding of *Rules* and the *Puzzle Piece* (Juul, 2005 & 2008). Before arriving at such a

synthesis, each of these terms/concepts is carefully examined and their strengths and weaknesses detailed below.

Recursive Space:

Wood's concept of recursive space sees the act of playing in a video game as a continuous series of moves where the player attempts to reconfigure the game space with his/her actions. These reconfigurations are often moves that have been carefully thought out, at times well in advance. This might be seen as similar to a game like
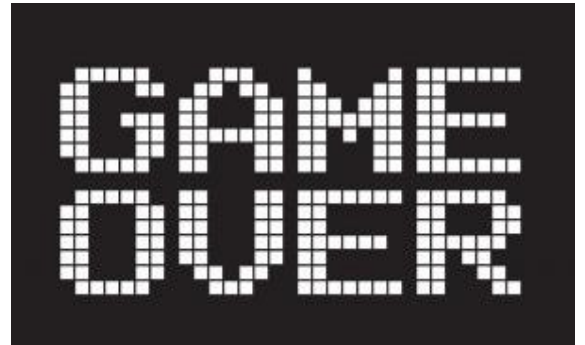
Figure 2: The Game Over Screen

chess, where the first move made by a player dictates the entire course of a match and every move that follows is not only in response but also in accordance with the first move.

In video games, the player also makes a move, anything from merely looking around in the game space or firing a volley of bullets at a non-playable character (NPC) controlled by the Artificial Intelligence (A.I.), and the game changes accordingly in response to these actions, thus setting off a loop of alternate space re-configurations from the AI in response to the player's actions that the player in turn reacts to. The loop continues till an impasse is reached when one of the two participants can no longer reconfigure the space (in case of Chess it could be a Checkmate and in case of video games either the level has been cleared or we have seen the dreaded *Game Over* screen). The recursive concept is a fairly uncomplicated one and is something that can be felt in every gaming activity where the player's actions determine the result of the activity (excludes games based on chance, what Caillois calls *Alea* like dice, gambling, etc.) (Caillois 1958/2005).

Magic Circle:

The magic circle was proposed by Salen and Zimmerman and is a concept that is a logical consequence of how Huizinga and Caillois look at play and games in their work (Huizinga 1938 and Caillois, 2001). The magic circle has been conceptualised by using four core sets of principles. The first is that entry to the circle is voluntary. Secondly, the circle is self-sufficient. The third distinguishes the magic circle from ordinary life,

Figure 3: A Representation of the magic circle

as the site of play acquires a new meaning when play begins and time in the magic circle also gains a new dimension. The fourth posits that the magic circle is governed by rules that do not apply to daily life.

This implies that new meanings are created in the course of play in a temporary world within the magic circle as rules of space and time coalesce to enable play (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). The need for a concept like the magic circle was felt when scholars attempted to demarcate the site of play from everyday life and to understand what happens when play begins. Salen and Zimmerman based their magic circle on the theories of play that Huizinga and Caillois had earlier formulated. Thus, their magic circle is both finite and infinite, and the magic of play is felt only once somebody enters the circle and they make clear cut distinctions between ordinary lives and play, suggesting that the borders between the two activities impervious (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004).

However, Salen and Zimmerman's conceptualisation of the magic circle has come under criticism in recent years. Their conceptualisation of the magic circle as a space which creates

a dichotomy between life and play has been severely criticised; the idea of playful instances in everyday activities challenges the notion of an impermeable barrier. Some critics have even questioned the enchantment that players are expected to feel in a place called the "magic circle." However, despite all its criticisms (Consalvo, 2009b) there is a crucial aspect that the concept offers that others have failed to provide: it enables us to understand what kind of a space a player enters when he/she is engaging in a game, something that is paramount if we are to understand video game experience.

Magic Cycle:

The magic cycle on the other hand is a framework suggested by Arsenault and Perron to study gaming activity. They understand playing a video game as a continuous loop between player input and computer output (a sort of primitive idea of recursive space). The framework draws from both gameplay and the algorithm of the game itself. They describe the magic cycle as "the magic circle being tilted on its head" (Arsenault & Perron, 2008 p.9).

Their model is represented by three interconnected spirals that run against a time axis (Figure 4). The time scale is divided into three specific segments: the game opening, the launch window and the exit window. In terms of game activity, a spiral each is devoted to Gameplay, Narrative and lastly the Interpretative spiral.

Figure 4: Arsenault & Perron's magic cycle (Arsenault & Perron, 2008 p.8)

On unpacking this framework, one realises that the model draws from a Ludo-narratological base, combining both gameplay and narrative, as their respective spirals are not mutually exclusive. This further implies that Arsenault & Perron take into account the effect narrative has on gameplay and vice-versa. The third and innermost spiral in the framework is the *Hermeneutic Spiral.* The authors however note that the size and location of the spirals in the diagram should be taken as merely indicative and does not imply the extent of their effect on gaming activity. The hermeneutic spiral they suggest looks at gamers reflecting and contemplating on their gameplay. The reflections could be either on the content of the game, the way the players play in the game worlds or any other aspect of gameplay experience.

What makes this spiral interesting however is its implication that gamers do reflect on their gameplay, in a sense go beyond the ludic elements and the story line of the game. This contradicts the earlier notion that gamers were too immersed in the gaming experience to have phases of reflective thinking during play. Also supporting this line of thought is recent work that describes the *Zen* like state of immersion felt by gamers, which is never constant but happens in fleeting moments often preceded by much lower levels of engagement (Brown & Cairns, 2004 and Calleja, 2007). The two ideas together offer us a possibility of capturing gamers' experience both in-game and after-game for analysis.it model doesn't begin when the game launches but originates much before it. This time of pre- launch is used by the gamers to see the loading screen and the rendering of the game space in front of the gamers' eyes; Arsenault and Perron argue that this creates a certain series of expectations even before play has begun (Arsenault & Perron, 2008). Similarly, there is some time given in the model even before

Figure 5: The puzzle piece

the game opens, this is when users gather primordial data about the game even before the pre-launch. Acts like reading the instruction manual belong in this time window. Accommodating these windows of time before the beginning of game play indicates that gaming experience extends far beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of the magic circle.

Rules and the Puzzle Piece**:**

Jesper Juul grapples with the conceptualisation of the magic circle and puts forth his own formulation, "the puzzle piece" (Juul, 2008). This stems from his understanding of three kinds of play where the first frame looks at games being played for rules, the second frame deals with games being played for experience and the last frame analyses games as a social context. It is from here that Juul derives his understanding of the magic circle being an imperfect separation.

Though his puzzle piece is in essence not very different from the magic circle he believes that the irregular shape of the puzzle piece breaks the uniformity that Salen and Zimmerman conceived in their theorisation of the magic circle. He feels this shape denotes the permeability in the space and also allows scholars to understand games in the natural context of the player and we can arrive at such an understanding only if the barriers between the magic circle and everyday life allow for context to flit in and out.

Jesper Juul also looks at rules in his book *Half-Real* and lays the foundation for analysis of gaming activities from a framework of rules and limitations in game spaces and game worlds (Juul, 2005). If the puzzle piece is irregularly designed and permeable for the context of the everyday to come in, in half real Juul talks about the rules in game worlds, making them seem

real to the point where gamers take context and meanings created during play back to their everyday lives. This thus, completes the circuit where context comes into the magic circle (an irregularly shaped one, of course) to shape play and newly created contexts from our cybernetic existences in games enter into the everyday life because they are "half-real"[12].

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[12] Jesper Juul calls the experience of playing video games Half Real. Where he argues that while the game-worlds in which players engage and the challenges they overcome are virtual in nature. The rules that govern and regulate the game-worlds and the challenges are however real and a player's efforts in overcoming these real rules must be understood in this frame of the "half-real." (Juul, 2005)

Name of the Concept / Model / Framework	Suggested by	Provides Insights Into	Key Characteristics	Doesn't Look At
Recursive Space	Aylish Wood	• Space in games • How games are played • the decisions players make	Allows us to analyze gaming activity as an alternative loop of space reconfiguration between players	• Game Worlds & Plots • The real world - magic circle divide
Magic Circle	Salen& Zimmerman	• The construction of the site of play • The barriers between play and everyday life	• Defines the magic circle as a uniform rigid space where the activities of play are situated. • Players involved in the circle are enchanted	• The players and their roles during play • Everyday life events affecting the magic circle
Magic Cycle	Arsenault &Perron	• The gamer's activities and thought processes in the magic circle • The video game as a thought and action triggering engine	• A ludo-narratological model • A model which looks at gaming activity as three distinct time frames and spirals • A hermeneutic spiral for gamers' thoughts	• The gamer's thoughts and decisions before first entering the magic circle • The gamer's thought process between two gaming cycles
Puzzle Piece & Rules	Jesper Juul	• Structure and functioning of games and sites of play • What makes games real	• Reimagines the magic circle as a non-uniform, flexible space with permeable boundaries	• The players in the site of play and their experiences.

Table 1: A snapshot of all the gaming ideas used in the synthetic approach

The Synthesis

Having defined the core concepts that are to be used to arrive at what I refer to as a synthetic approach, there is a need to further describe and explain the need for such an approach. Though each of the preceding concepts is extremely useful to understand video game experience none of them is able to provide a holistic description or understanding of a gaming instance. The magic circle is excellent in explaining the site of play but it fails to demystify the enchantment that one feels once inside the circle nor does it account for the role that contexts and circumstances from everyday life play inside the circle during play and how the experience of play enters the life world.

Similarly, the Magic Cycle is an alternative framework that to a certain extent is able to clear the aura of *magic* inside the magic circle. The fact that Arsenault & Perron are willing to look at repeated cycles to get a clear picture opens possibilities to not only work with context but also glean information on how players' experience changes with experience gained from each cycle. In other words, after repeated rounds of chess, players' strategies evolve and mastery over the rules of the game significantly improve compared to a first-time player.

However, the framework is limited on the time axis as it fails to look at the loop when a player exits the current cycle and returns for the next cycle. If the framework calls for a focus on the hermeneutic thought process of the gamer, how can researchers neglect the time period when the gamer isn't playing but has the time and scope to sit back and reflect on his/her actions from the game world? Gamers do bring back their experiences from the magic circle after all and they are most likely to have learning from those reflections that they will apply in their next cycle. The importance of understanding the thought process in the loop of

logging out from the game world and understanding the spectrum of varied motivations that lead to the player logging back into the game world for a new cycle cannot be overstated.

Lastly, Jesper Juul's conception of the Puzzle Piece definitely breaks the rigid uniformity and dichotomy of the magic circle, but beyond these new features the model on its own doesn't go much beyond the conception of Salen and Zimmerman.

This is why we believe that *Rules* and *Recursive Space* are the fundamental ideas around which a synthetic approach should be built, while of course taking into account some of the aspects of other models described here.

The resultant framework will use Wood's idea of recursive space in tandem with Juul's understanding of rules to understand how gaming experiences are structured keeping in mind these basic principles of pursuing *success* and *fun* in games. The magic circle will be used to understand the site of play and one's entry into the game world. The magic cycle will explain to us what happens when one enters the magic circle and expands on repeated engagements with the game world and enables us to lay the foundation of a hermeneutic thought process in players' engagements. The hermeneutic thought process enables us to understand gaming experience from an ethnographic perspective which will provide us with information, context and experiences from everyday life. Lastly, the puzzle piece helps establish a continuum between the game world and everyday life introducing a permeable barrier that allows us to situate context in game play and experiences from the game world in gamers' everyday lives.

Magic Circle
• New meanings of time and space at time of play
• Distinction between play and life

Magic Cycle
• The pre-play phase
• The Hermeneutic Spiral

Synthetic Approach:
▪ **Gamer Context**

▪ **Everyday** → In-Game Existence
→ Out of the Gameworld

▪ **In- Game Context**
• Experience
• Strategy
• Reflection

Puzzle Piece
• the magic circle as a non-uniform, flexible space with permeable boundaries

Recursive Space
• Reconfiguring Space in games
• Players' decisions in-game spaces
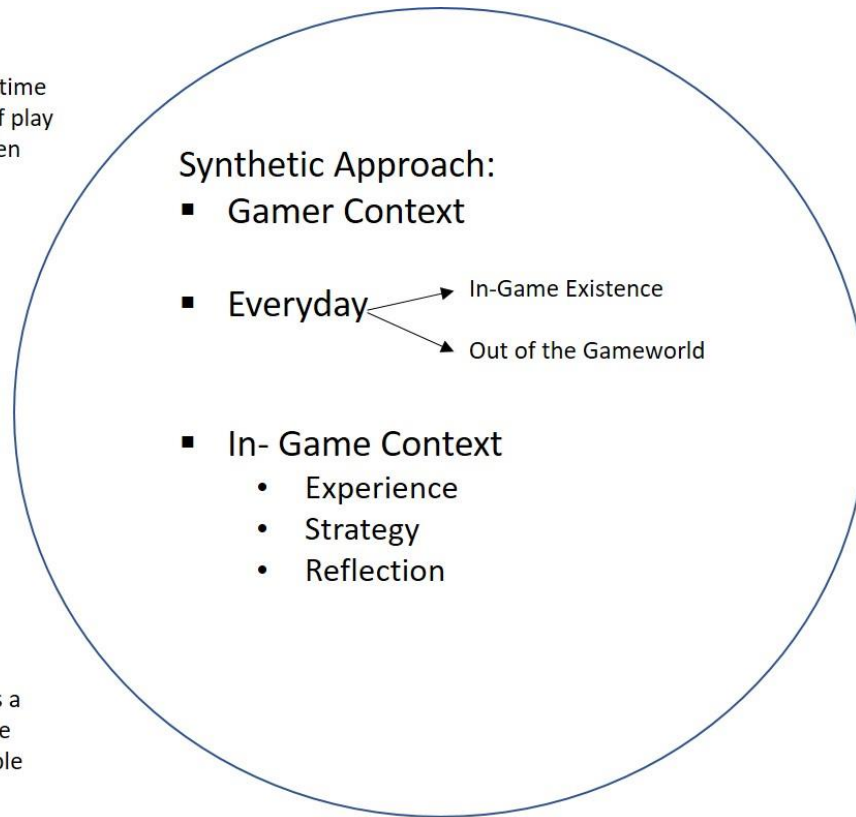
Figure 6: A visual representation of the Synthetic Model

Taking this synthetic approach provided us with a dynamic snapshot full of possibilities to not only further our understanding of gaming experience but also achieve a holistic understanding of gaming experience and action from a multitude of perspectives.

Operationalizing Key terms

It was a challenge to arrive at a clear-cut definition for who would fit into a working definition of the term *gamers* and what exactly the content of that definition could be (Deshbandhu, 2016; Aarseth & Calleja, 2015). However, for this study *gamers* were defined as, people who view playing video games as their primary leisure time activity. The term

gaming on the other hand was defined as a multifarious activity which is digital in nature and across platforms (e.g. mobile phones, computers and consoles).

No single factor could be used to determine who would qualify as a player of video games for the study. Instead, a multi-dimensional approach was used. A video game player's engagement with the medium can be measured against three parameters. Namely,

1. The years spent playing video games

2. The intensity of game play which is the amount of time a gamer spends on an instance of play

3. The regularity of play, i.e. how often the gamer plays the game.

Since, the study used the snowball technique and a sponsorship model in order to find participants, the participant of origin for each of the parallel snowballs had to meet a combination of qualifying criteria, across the three parameters. The conditions set were:

1. Should have played video games across any platform for a time period of *five* years. Five years had been chosen as the time limit for qualification because it seemed a sufficient time for the players to have an experience of playing a variety of games across genres. Theory also suggests that usage of a diversity of products and platforms by gamers will provide us with responses based on a diverse experience. The five-year time limit also gives the gamer ample time to become a part of gaming community(s) in a sense of *practice*

2. Their instances of gameplay on an average should be 60 minutes long

3. They should play games at least twice a week.

Data Collection and Tool Development

It is hard to argue against the observation that, the video game as a product is a perfect synthesis of all the unique characteristics that new media has to offer (Lister, 2003) and a medium truly post-modern as such can't be adequately understood by the approaches of a single school of thought. Understanding of the literature emerging from the field has made it clear that it is very difficult to use a pre-set method or a singular approach in attempting to understand video game experience and gamers' engagement as a whole.

Building a Participant Pool

The participants for this study were brought together using a Snowball technique. The snowball, a non-probability purposive sampling method seemed ideally suited here because gamers are often parts of well-knit groups as they do not only know each other's gaming activities but also share content, devices and games together in their everyday lives.

The sponsorship nature of the snowball technique also to a large extent also ensured that subsequent participants all qualified for the study as they were recommended by like-minded individuals who had a fair idea of the method and purpose of the study by then [13]. However, that there was a need to use *four* distinct parallel snowballs to ensure that the resultant pool acquired a heterogeneous set of participants with varied game-experiences across platforms. The need for a heterogenous sample was essential as it would provide the study with diverse and contextually rich data. The diversity would ensure that the participant pool would have players from different backgrounds, hail from different

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[13] The use of a snowball sample sees the reference of follow-up participants emerge from existing participants in the study. This practice of reference can be compared to the process of sponsorship.

geographical locations, different socio-cultural backgrounds, played on a variety of gaming platforms and a a consequence allow us to chart a wide range of ludic journeys which would consequently enable a holistic charting of the Indian gaming scene.

Research Instruments

There wasn't a single research tool that seemed adequate to be able to record the multitude of gaming experiences that players have in their everyday lives. With the study being of a qualitative nature and steeped in an ethnographic approach there was a certain freedom that worked in our favor as we were liberated from the rigidity of method and techniques that is paramount in studies of a positivist nature.

In this study, I used quite a few research methods and instruments to elicit information in the hope to carefully and accurately capture the participants' gaming experiences. The instruments and methods that were used were:

1. In-Depth interviews: One of the most common qualitative tools available at our disposal, I felt that the focused and simple nature of the method enabled the participants to dwell in detail on their gamic actions and choices. The method was also perfectly suited to obtain precise answers to specific questions. The interviews were loosely structured around an interview guide which was developed and fine-tuned after a pilot study involving four participants.

2. Co-Playing & Participant Observation: The second method I relied on was the participant observation technique. Owing to the nature of play in video games a lot of them enable for two-player play where I proposed playing with the participant and

used the opportunity to break the researcher/participant divide and cause the participant to open-up by viewing me as a fellow game player. Boellstorff is keen on the use of a mix of participant observation and co-playing as he believes researchers can arrive at new understandings of meaning-making by mixing the two at the same time (Boellstorff, 2012). The method not only caused the participant to shed his/her inhibitions but also provided him/her an opportunity to dwell analytically and critically on their ludic actions immediately when questioned.

3. Diary Method: It was also essential for capturing a holistic gaming experience to be able to record the hermeneutical thought process that gamers indulge in after they stop playing, but reflect on their activities in the game, this thought process was essential to understand the choices and decisions that thinking gamers would make.

The diary method seemed ideal as it would enable the gamers to record their thoughts, ideas and strategies on a regular basis and thereby providing us a window into their gaming experiences. The drawback of the method included that not many participants would regularly make entries but out of the limited number who did, we had a unique trove of information that other methods failed to provide.

The data collection stage followed a longitudinal approach where fourteen participants participated in the study. Each participant was visited in his/her preferred gaming environments and interviewed, observed seven times over the course of an eighteen-month (precisely 543 days, from 1st February 2015 to 30th July 2016) period. The participants were provided the diary on their first day of interaction. The participants initially were expected to answer broad questions from a loosely-structured interview guide (ref. Annex 1), answers

to which were often obtained by the end of the second or third meeting. The information obtained from these early interviews was then used to develop sets of specific and nuanced questions that catered to the player's specific online and offline contexts, gaming habits, ludic journeys and in-game choices.

The diaries were collected from the participants on the last day of interaction and throughout the data collection period participants were encouraged to write specific in-game happenings and things that excited them into the diary. The information from the diary provided unique insights into the player psyche as they exercised different forms of biases to decide what went into the diary and what stayed out.

Reflections on Data Collection

The data collection phase took longer than was initially estimated. Meeting each of the fourteen participants for a minimum of seven times meant that there were 98 individual sessions, each lasting about seven to eight hours on an average. A considerable amount of time was spent observing and co-playing, followed by interviews and then reviewing the entries made in the diary. The large amount of time required for each session meant that the participants could only be available on the weekends and this, combined with the occasional cancellations and rescheduling, stretched the data collection phase to over a year.

The time during the weekdays was used to transcribe interview sessions and identify core points of the participants' player experiences in order to build the nuanced set of question for the upcoming sessions. Time was also spent prior to the interviews to identify the games the participants were involved/engaging with in order to be able to procure, acquire them and spend time in order to learn and internalize the game-worlds for the co-playing sessions.

In case of a participant who specialized in mobile games, I felt it was necessary to play the game for close to a year in order to appreciate the amount of effort that players are willing to put in and closely observe and experience the challenges they face in fluid game worlds.

Looking at this study through an anthropological frame, the classic Malinowskian approach talks about a distinct divide between the "home" and the "field" where the researcher would spend time in the field taking copious amounts of notes and would then go back "home" and spend time analyzing and writing. The distinction between the two was clear and well defined, the researcher braved the field and then the reward for that was the analysis and writing from the comforts of the home (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). However, work since then has challenged the classical binary of the home and the field (Clifford, 1997) and the division blurs further when the field acquires a digital dimension. Kuntsman in particular, draws from the work of Michaela Fay and Radhika Gajjala to view Cyberethnography as not only ethnography at home or ethnography of home but as "home-work". A move he argues, makes the classical discussion of native and non-native anthropologists irrelevant (Kuntsman, 2009).

Drawing from the above-mentioned arguments, I would like to state that my data collection phase had an "everyday field" for the entirety of its duration, I was constantly either in participants' native environments, transcribing interviews, collating notes, playing requisite games and building nuanced questionnaires; to put it simply, a complete and holistic engagement with the field. I would like to further question the notion of a bounded field. Is the field for this study limited only to the players' preferred gaming environments or does it also include the sites of meaning-making such as the game-worlds they inhabit, the places

they hang out with fellow gamers and my "home" (for the lack of a better word; at times, it was a hotel room) where I sat to transcribe notes and make meanings of my own? Undoubtedly, all of these were of paramount importance to the data collection process. I think, in order to pursue studies where the digital, the offline and the everyday intersect (like this one) we need to complicate the understanding of what a field means and see it instead as transient and existing across dimensions and realms; thus, allowing for all of the above discussed locations to be a part of my "field" and my "home" as required, going back and forth with an analytical lens.

Moving from the notion of the field to look at the subjects of analysis; at first glance fourteen participants might seem a small number for a study of this kind. Initially it was proposed to include thirty participants, but through the course of the fieldwork the large amount of data generated along with the emergence of redundancies led us to reconsider the number. In addition, the use of three different data collection approaches—co-playing, interviewing and diary entries-- meant that each participant could be considered an individual case of ludic engagement that could contribute to a broader understanding of gaming culture in India.

The snowball technique while extremely successful in identifying male participants for the study failed to work in the case of women participants. During the proposal and the pilot-phase it seemed that connecting to one woman participant would provide us with the required number; an assumption that proved erroneous. However, of the fourteen participants only three were women and the ones that I was able to find were very hesitant to talk about their engagement with video games. A few pointed out that their family members weren't aware of their playing habits and bringing a researcher into the home

context would complicate matters for them.

Participants opened up by the second interview and talked freely about their ludic achievements and other issues concerning the everyday. The effectiveness of the co-playing sessions cannot be overstated as the players' proficiency in game worlds, their in-game choices, decisions and approaches, styles of play could be observed, experienced and analyzed first-hand. While the need to observe and play at the same time meant that I found it extremely difficult to showcase my ability as a player often causing the participants to question my playing proficiency; the opportunity to question a gamer in action was extremely valuable for the study.

The use of diaries however, wasn't as successful as every participant had a different idea of what was supposed to go into the diary. While some of them were excited to share their ludic achievements and strategies, some of them wrote their diary as an instruction manual for other players. Four of the participants had very few entries, two had not entered anything through the course of the study. The rest were quite regular in their entries and five of them supplemented their diaries with personal notes, cut-outs and pictures giving us a great amount of insight into the player psyche.

Analytic Process

The data collected from the interviews, the co-playing/participant observation sessions and the diaries was assimilated and then initially subjected to open-coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2006). The data was disaggregated into three broad themes namely; experience of play, costs and finances of play and community and social elements. After open coding the re-arranged data was further explored using axial coding as newer micro and

specific themes emerged.

During the process of coding it was essential to ensure that when data was being re-arranged key contextual cues and other relevant information were not lost. Attention was paid at every stage to ensure that no context, gender and experiential markers were overlooked or left-out.

Coding the data was extremely useful in sifting through large amounts of data from transcriptions as average interview sessions lasted often more than two hours at a time. Observations and quotes from co-playing and participant observation sessions were also at times unwieldy as players were often accustomed to marathon sessions of play (often lasting 5-8 hours at a stretch).

Having outlined the field of game studies and arriving at a concrete framework and methodology to holistically capture gaming experience, the next chapter of the thesis deals with issues of player identity. It critically examines what it means to be a "gamer" by unshackling the term from its popular and mainstream conception and the consequent stereotypes perpetuated by it.

Chapter - 3

Player Perspectives: Gamers & Gamerworthiness[14]

Introduction

Central to the world of gaming is the gamer, and while considerable attention has been paid to the structure and role of games, to the relationship of games with the real world, and the social/psychology of gaming, there has been relatively less focus on the figure of the gamer. To understand what it means to be a gamer, scholars such as Shaw and Taylor have reshaped de Beauvoir's iconic phrase: "one is not born a gamer, one becomes one" (Shaw, 2013; Taylor, 2009; cf. Beauvoir 1989 [1949]). On a superficial level this simply means that one chooses to be a gamer and can be identified as one by engaging with video games. However, the tag 'gamer' in popular culture implies much more about an individual than a neutral label applied to someone who plays video games. The most popular stereotype of gamers and gaming activity is aptly described by Williams as "isolated, pale-skinned teenage boys [who] sit hunched forward on a sofa in some dark basement space, obsessively mashing buttons" (Williams, 2005 p. 2).

Gaming scholarship and mainstream culture have debunked the popular stereotype of the gamer as a white, male, teenager (Williams et al., 2008). Kowert et al. (2012) state that gamers are often viewed as incompetent and undesirable and have found that the stereotype of gamers often centres around four main themes: (un)popularity, (un)attractiveness, (non)dominance, and social (in)competence (Kowert et. al, 2012) --stereotypes that have

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[14] An earlier version of this chapter was published in the University of Glasgow's journal, Press-Start. The citation for the article is: Deshbandhu, A. (2016). Player Perspectives: What It Means to Be a Gamer. Press Start, 3(2), 48-64.

been reinforced in popular television shows such as The Big Bang Theory (Lorre et al. 2007 - present; Bednarek, 2012), South Park (Parker, Stone 1997-present) and Chuck (Schwartz, Fedak 2007-12). This chapter seeks to unpack the term from the perspective of self-identified gamers, drawing upon their insights and experiences of engaging with video games over time. It builds on their definitions and understanding of their gaming experience to arrive at a broader understanding of what it means to be a gamer from the perspectives of players. Specifically, it draws on gamers in the Indian context—again, a geography that is under-represented in games studies. With India as a nation primed to make the digital jump and adapt to an increasingly connected society in the next two decades, gaming is expected to emerge as a key digital activity for leisure. The need to study gaming and gaming culture in this context then becomes a foundational exercise.

To begin with, if we were to focus on the term *gamer*, the video game industry constructs it as one who needs to engage with video games on a 'hardcore' level and wants to play the latest and greatest at all times in order to remain worthy of the label (Kerr, 2006). Most gamer stereotypes in popular culture stem from this construction of the ideal hardcore gamer. The notion of hardcore gamers has also led to the creation of casual players which in turn has spawned the serious gaming/casual playing binary among players of video games. Once people like Juul began to classify a certain kind of players as "hardcore" it automatically became imperative to understand the ones who didn't meet the aforementioned criteria as the other side of the spectrum. Thus, the category of "casual" players was created to fill that void. Scholars like Consalvo feel that due to this binary the gaming pursuits of casual players have not been given adequate attention (Consalvo, 2009c).

Jesper Juul understands the casual player as someone who prefers positive and pleasant fictions, plays a few video games, is willing to commit small amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and dislikes difficult games (Juul, 2010 p.29). On the other hand, he views the hardcore gamer as someone seeking emotionally negative fictions, playing a large number of video games, investing large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoying difficult games (Juul, 2010 p. 29). Juul's definitions concur with the understanding of the video game industry and popular culture that there are many players of video games but only a select few of them can be called 'gamers'.

Method

The study as a whole looked at gaming experience in a hermeneutical context of everydayness, and this chapter presents a subset of the data to understand from the players' perspectives how they understood their gaming activity and their own identity as gamers/players. Borrowing from Nick Couldry's *Media as Practice* approach the study sought to understand what players do to/with video games on a daily basis as a practice (Couldry, 2004).

The specific questions used to elicit the data presented in this chapter were:

Considering the term *gamer*, what are your opinions about the term?

    a. What do you think are the qualities/attributes one must have in order to be called a gamer?

    b. Would you call yourself a *gamer?*

    c. Is there a gamer you look up to, someone you would consider an *ideal* gamer? Describe your concept of an ideal gamer.

    d. What do you think makes him/her ideal?

    e. Would you like to emulate your ideal?

There have been attempts by scholars to categorise gamers by style and purpose of play (Bartle, 1996; Yee, 2005) but by and large these have resulted in imposed or deductive typologies. In this study, I attempt to derive an emic perspective of gamer identity, based on how the participants describe themselves and their activity. Data from the larger pool of participants (14) suggested that the (self) shaping of identity is an individualised process that is fuelled by the dynamics of the in-game and off-game lives that each player leads. The three cases used here are illustrative of this process and can be considered to be *ideal-types* (Weber, 1949) as the varied context and experiences provide us with a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. They have been selected based on their distinctiveness while also allowing us to understand the process of (self) identity creation on a more general level.

The first participant, Bhargav, plays single player games and is someone whom Juul would classify as a 'hardcore' gamer, (Juul, 2010 p.29) the second, Radhika, is a console and mobile player who plays only a few selected games and whose gaming experiences would be labelled casual and the third, Ishaan, is a professional video game reviewer who has access to the latest and greatest and would also fit Juul's label of the "hardcore gamer". The next section looks at the profiles of the three participants and outlines their gaming lives and experiences in order to establish the context and the circumstances that helped shape their journeys of play.[15]

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[15] The participants have waived their right to remain anonymous. However, I have only identified them by first names and has refrained from providing any other identity markers.

<u>Player Profiles</u>

1.   Bhargav – the Explorer[16]

Bhargav (21) began playing on a Sega *Genesis* console when he was in kindergarten, graduating from games such as *Mario, Contra* and *Wolfenstein* to DOS based games such as *Prince, Dave* and *DesertStrike* on the PC. He spends about three hours a day on his time PlayStation 4 playing *FIFA, Assassins Creed, FarCry* and *Batman*. Bhargav spends hours exploring game-worlds in search of adventure.

> "Collecting newer perks and enhancing my characters' abilities, is something I really look forward to in the games I play. I spend hours at a time experimenting with the various skills and combinations available to find the right balance to clear a particular level. To sustain these levels of engagement I always look for games with good stories as often the story drives you to be a better player." (Bhargav)

2.   Radhika – the Slasher

Radhika (25) began her journey with video games by playing *Super Mario 64* on the *Nintendo 64* and soon moved up to the Nintendo Gameboy. She is a console veteran and has been playing on her Xbox 360 for close to a decade. She also spends a considerable amount of time playing games on her Android phone and tablet. Radhika plays a number of games at the same time across platforms and devices and the ease with which she picks up right from where she left off is key to understanding her video game pursuits.

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[16] The identification codes are titles that participants have given themselves while reflecting upon the playing styles and preferences they most identify with.

One of her favourite games is Mortal Kombat for its simple game format and extremely high re-play value. On her handheld device(s), Radhika makes it a point to play a new game every month and has a keen interest in the niche genre of *Diner* games she also rigorously plays Just Dance and Zumba using the Kinect functionality to stay physically fit.

> "I like to really dive into the games I play and don't spend much time delving into the story and other fine print. I crave action in the games I play and firmly believe that the best way to learn a game is to die/fail a few times. Experience is the best teacher; how hard can a game be?"
>
> (Radhika)

3. Ishaan – the Reviewer

Ishaan (25) is a professional video game reviewer who contributes to one of south India's largest circulated English news dailies and runs a gaming website. He spends a lot of time talking and thinking about games and the video game industry both professionally and as a player. Having begun his gaming life with games like Math Blaster and Reader Rabbit, Ishaan today is a cross platform player who plays a plethora of games on a daily basis. Games are an important aspect of both his work and leisure. He views gaming as his most important activity and has a penchant for first person shooters (FPS) and role-playing games (RPGs). While he accepts that he is a gamer first, he is conscientious about retaining his objectivity as a reviewer.

> "My work is *playing* and it feels great when you are paid to do something you really love. Gaming is a habit and a routine of sorts; my entire day is structured around the games I am playing for work and

then the games I want to play. Livestreaming the games, I play (on

Twitch and YouTube Gaming) is also an important part of the daily

schedule." (Ishaan)

The three proposed gamer categories (Explorer, Slasher and Reviewer) are further elucidated below, in the discussion section.

<u>Gaming in the Everyday</u>

It is in the frame of the everyday that this chapter charts the gaming practices of three individuals and capture their individual gaming journeys. The everyday frame provides us with insights not only into the complex process of meaning making and their distinct ludic journeys but also enables us to comprehend their gaming self-identities in relation to their off-line selves.

Bhargav had few friends as a child, and credits his parents for his entry into gaming by buying him the Sega 64 console. "My parents felt that games would keep me engaged and prevent me from feeling lonely," he points out. He finds playing games every day is therapeutic, helping him beat bouts of stress and depression. His gaming experiences have also helped him make new friends and find like-minded people. He feels that having friends playing the same game is essential for the game to remain both interesting and engaging. Bhargav feels that video games as a medium impart morals and are good teachers:

> "Video Games, Nathan Drake (the protagonist of Naughty Dog's
>
> Uncharted series) in particular; have taught me to trust and count on
>
> my friends. A quality that I have been able to imbibe in my non-game
>
> life as well." (Bhargav)

On hand-held devices Radhika spent numerous hours on runners (games where characters run endlessly, faster and faster) like *Temple Run* (playing with Scarlet Fox) and *Subway Surfer*. She now has discarded these and has instead developed a keen interest in games that that simulate the experience of managing a diner, even though she confesses to having no interest in culinary activities in her non-gaming life. Radhika carefully searches for diner games that offer more than a mere time-based challenge,

> "I look for games that need me to master more complex recipes, add equipment to my kitchen and allow me to find new ways to cut down on time by experimenting and streamlining the cooking process. There are very few games like that and definitely not ones that are free to play." (Radhika)

Radhika views gaming as a key part of her daily schedule as she uses her Xbox to not only beat stress with a round of *Mortal Kombat* but also by engaging with *Just Dance* and *Zumba*. Her gaming/fitness sessions are about an hour long and physically intense.

As a video game reviewer Ishaan calls his gaming activity a habit and a routine and his favourite gaming franchise is Bioware's Mass Effect, a series that combines shooting with role playing in a futuristic cross-galaxy setup. He began his first career in the gaming industry at a gaming café in Delhi where he encouraged other players to play for longer sessions. His life as a reviewer began when a representative from the newspaper spotted him in a *Captain America* outfit at the Delhi Comic-Con.

A resident of the national capital region, Ishaan had spent both time and resources to have in place a gaming set up, with two sets of power backups to compensate for the frequent

power outages.[17] He however found the limited Internet bandwidth inhibiting and was forced to relocate in order to be able to livestream content.

> "I had really low-speed internet and it was hindering [the website's]
>
> growth as we couldn't livestream/webcast most of the times, and then
>
> one day I was covering Bangalore Comic-Con and I decided to relocate
>
> to Bangalore permanently." (Ishaan)

Since the shift to Bangalore, a lot has changed as Ishaan streams up to four times a week. With livestreams Ishaan's gaming activity, has gained a newer *social* dimension (Taylor, 2012). Livestreaming sessions require him not only to play well but also to keep his viewers engaged with live commentary and answers to their comments/questions.

Playing games both for work and leisure implies that Ishaan plays video games for most of the day and must constantly negotiate with what activities constitute *work* and what can be deemed as *play*. He finds the two are often inseparable but acknowledges that work becomes difficult when he has to review games that do not meet his standards of play. "It's really difficult to play something that you don't want to at a time when you could be spending the same time playing something exciting," he adds. For leisure Ishaan often plays *Counterstrike: GO* (CS: GO) as he finds its multiplayer dimension both *fun* and *annoying* owing to its unpredictable nature. When he's not gaming, he often cycles around with a mounted phone in his Bangalore neighbourhood, playing *Niantic's* augmented-reality massively multiplayer online location-based game *Ingress*.

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[17]India has intermittent power cuts, especially in the summer.

For each of the players, gaming is an important aspect of their daily lives; it is in fact more than a habit or a conscious ritual—it is a practice that gives to and draws from the structure of their everyday. While for one gaming plays a role in building community, for the second it offers a means of physical exercise and release and for the third it traverses the fine line between work and home. The fact however remains that the gaming itself has been integrated into their lives in a way that renders them *ordinary*.

Bhargav's tendency to consider exploration and unearthing unknown nuggets of in-game information the most important facets of gameplay make him an apt fit into Bartle's category of the Explorer. Radhika's tendency to dive into games head-first and learn the right way to play from mistakes and failures allows for her to b categorized as a Slasher (a player type that is discussed in detail further in the chapter). Lastly, Ishaan's approach to all the games he plays from the point of view of a reviewer makes his classification as one an obvious choice.

<u>Decoding the Gamer Tag</u>

The nerd, the anti-social geek, the escapist, the techno-addict, the mindless clicker or the role-playing schemer… the many stereotypes that exist about gamers range from partial truths to complete misrepresentations. But what shows up in the mirror when a gamer looks into it? How do those who intensively engage with digital/video games and the gaming world understand themselves in an everyday context? This section seeks to answer these questions by critically examining the opinions, meanings, construction, and understanding of the three aforementioned video game players with regards to the term gamer.

a)   Who is a Gamer?

Bhargav feels that there are two kinds of gamers namely, *gamers* and *pro-gamers* (Taylor, 2012 p.88). He believes that pro-gamers are people who play video games for a living and take part in e-sport competitions.

He understands gamers as players who finish the games they choose to play.

> "It's obvious that a game is like a story. If one begins the journey, then it needs to be finished. If one wants to be known as a gamer, then s/he must finish the games they choose. I understand that not all games are worthy of being finished, but aren't gamers supposed to know what they want and buy the games they badly want to play?"

> "Aren't players supposed to put in effort and time researching the games they want to play; then shouldn't they finish the games they love and justify the money spent? It's not exactly difficult, is it?"
> (Bhargav)

Radhika however views a gamer as someone who is adept at switching across platforms and video game genres, and at the same time willing) to spend hours refining their skills. She feels that the key for someone worthy to be called a gamer is versatility.

> "Somebody who plays the same game over and over again can't be called a gamer as they need to adapt to new game worlds, their rules and systems are extremely important for the gaming experience."
> (Radhika)

Ishaan believes in the existence of a player-gamer duality amongst video game players and feels gamers are different from players in their willingness to toil and put in the requisite

number of hours to not merely master a game's world and its rules but to internalize them on a deeper level so that they can be manipulated to one's advantage.

> "The ability to make the right choice at the precise moment every single time is what makes a gamer, because a game world is always in flux as in an industry which has been overly enthusiastic in embracing updates and downloadable content the worlds, rules and regulations in games are no longer constant. Thus, playing styles and strategies always need to be updated and constantly re-worked." (Ishaan)

b)   Labelling identity: gamer or player?

Bhargav identifies as a gamer and feels that the number of games he plays and their variety in terms of play-styles and genres qualifies him for the tag. He feels that he is "addicted" to video games, but is very quick to point out that he does not see himself as a pro-gamer.

Radhika on the other hand feels that the tag gamer is too heavy for her and calls herself a player instead. She feels that there is socio-cultural pressure from fellow gamers to play a certain kind of games and there is a constant need to play the latest titles in order to be worthy of the gamer tag.

> "At times, I feel that I have to put on a facade when people ask me what games I play. I reel off the names of a few fancy current tiles like the current *Call of Duty/ Need for Speed* because I feel I am judged when I say games like *Mortal Kombat* or *Just Dance*. Somehow, I feel the games I play are not *gamerworthy* but I am fine with that. We do play

for fun and I have the most fun playing *Mortal Kombat* or in virtual

kitchens and in the long run that's what matters." (Radhika)

Ishaan, too, associates with the gamer tag very strongly and feels one can't be a video game reviewer if they are not a gamer first. However, he feels that what makes him a gamer is the fact that he is a better player than most. He has been playing video games for a very long time and the cumulative gaming experiences from various games give him a reservoir of skills, approaches and strategies to draw from whenever he approaches a new game.

c)   Negotiation with the Ideal Gamer

Bhargav's mental image of an ideal gamer is that of a cross-platform male player who is open to playing all genres of games and always looking forward to new gaming experiences.

Radhika visualizes her ideal gamer as a male player whose primary gaming device is a custom-made PC as she feels that a gamer must be one not only aware of the games they want to play but also aware of the hardware required to enable an ideal gaming experience. She concludes by saying, "He needs to be able to build the computer he imagines in order to play the best he can."

Ishaan's ideal gamer is his friend who goes by the gamer tag Brutality in the world of *League of Legends* (LOL). Brutality is a top ranked *pro-player* (Taylor, 2012 p.88) who has spent about five hours a day, playing LOL every day for the last five years.

It is important to note that neither Ishaan nor Radhika are interested in becoming the ideal gamers they visualise. Ishaan is satisfied being better than average at the games he plays as he is willing to sacrifice being the best at one game in order to play a newer game. Moving to

Radhika, she is happy playing on a console as long as she can stay fit using games like *Just Dance* and always has *Mortal Kombat* to play. Bhargav on the other hand looks at his construction of the ideal gamer as a benchmark he has to achieve someday and hopes he will remain an explorer in the search for newer games always.

The three gamer tags mentioned above: *Explorer, Slasher* and *Reviewer* need to be defined as exclusive categories drawing from but distinctive to the ones suggested by Bartle and Yee. *Explorer* as a category is used by Bartle (1996) in his understanding of players from MUDs and Bhargav's interpretation of being an Explorer is similar to Bartle's when it comes to exploring a game's boundaries. However, Bhargav views exploration as an essential activity to not only acclimatise with the underlying mechanisms of the game world but also as a *coming-of-age* journey for his character/Avatar as it leads to both unravelling the story and acquiring newer perks by levelling up, an act that is the primary objective of Bartle's *Achiever* category. It is also important to note that in games which are not *MMORPGs* or *MUDs* specific areas of the game world cannot be accessed if one's character hasn't been adequately "levelled up." There is a blurring of the boundaries between Bartle's two categories as exploration has become vitally important in order to unearth newer perks, abilities, and is at times key to levelling up quicker. Thus, in-game explorers often become achievers in the process and vice-versa.

The category Slasher on the other hand is easier to define, and though on the surface it seems similar to the *Killer* category proposed by Bartle it is important to note that Slashers dive head-on into in-game situations and learn depending on the outcomes of their actions. Unlike killers they are seeking no joy by killing other's characters but rely more in the ability to

"wing it" and succeed when it matters. A slasher is not too bothered by the context of the game or the story or the underlying mechanics but is more concerned about overcoming the challenge and finding the most optimum/efficient way to do so. A slashing playstyle can be often successfully employed by players in game genres like FPS, Action RPGs and Hack and Slash.

Lastly, the reviewer category is one which extends beyond a player's self-experiences as a reviewer is an opinion-leader and his/her experiences help shape the decisions of the larger gaming community. A reviewer's approach to video games cannot be the same as that of a player as he/she is constantly measuring and comparing their newer game experiences to the games they have played earlier. This need to judge games can be detrimental at times to their gaming styles as they do not have control over the kinds of games they get to play. A reviewer must be good at playing in a variety of styles and must be quick to adapt and learn and thereby doesn't share any similarities with the four categories that Bartle proposes, since for the reviewer time is always a constraint.

Analysis of the data beyond the gamer tags reveals that all three players have unique ideas about what it means to be a gamer. Their opinions on the subject are derived from their everyday gaming experiences, which have also played a key role in shaping their perspectives of and about gaming. Bhargav devotes his time to single player games and is always in search of newer games with exciting narratives. Thus, his vision of the ideal gamer is of someone who plays as many games as possible across-platforms. He strongly believes that he can emulate that ideal and thus looks at it as a benchmark that he must reach and hopefully surpass in his gaming journey.

Ishaan on the other hand, owing to his role as a video game reviewer, not only has free access to the latest and greatest of games but on many levels, personifies the standard that Bhargav described. However, the nature of his work ensures that Ishaan is always running short of time, something Bhargav has in abundance. Ishaan hardly has the time to finish even two to three flagship games in a year whereas Bhargav finishes about six-seven games in the same time. It is ironic that Ishaan is at a level that Bhargav hopes to reach someday, but Ishaan doesn't have the time to truly appreciate what is available to him. At the same time Ishaan concedes that it is impossible in his line of work to achieve the ideal he envisions. His need to play as many games as possible in as little time as possible is a daunting task as reviews and streams lose value if they aren't current, he is in an unending race with deadlines.

Radhika's refusal to identify herself as a gamer is problematic on several levels. Her belief that a gamer needs to play the latest games coupled with her feeling that the games she plays are not *gamerworthy* suggests that Consalvo (2009c) was right, the gaming community believes in both the hardcore/casual binary and the video game industry's stereotype of the hardcore gamer. Radhika's choice of games though diverse and varied significantly break the *Pink Games* (Taylor, 2009 p. 99-102) barrier but her responses resonate with Shaw's observations that interviewees feel their acts of gaming are trivialized and stigmatized (Shaw, 2012 p.5). Furthermore, Radhika's construction of the ideal gamer as a PC player, considering PC is the one platform she doesn't play on, indicates that she finds her gaming experiences to be inadequate.

The concept of *gamerworthiness* offers us newer possibilities and points of entry into the players' psyche; and holds the potential to be a useful tool to enable a holistic charting of ludic journeys. It has been explored, examined and defined in the next half of this chapter.

Perhaps not unsurprisingly, all the three participants view their ideal gamer as being male. Though studies indicate that the stereotype of gamers being pre-dominantly male isn't true (Schott et al., 2000; Williams et al., 2008; Williams et al. 2009a; Williams et al. 2009b; Kowert et al., 2012; Taylor 2009) other studies have revealed that the virtual worlds of video games also have their own pre-defined gender roles that players and their avatars are expected to conform with (Lehdonvirta et al. 2012, Lehdonvirta et al 2014). Results of such studies are yet to permeate the mainstream and the video game economy at large.

Gamerworthiness

Our understanding of the "gamer" is part of a constant debate between nature of the game and the culture of gaming where scholars feel that the tag causes players to shy away from associating with it and trivialize their efforts (Shaw, 2012). The desire to continuously compare oneself with the industry propagated stereotype (Kerr, 2006) and understanding hardcore gamers as players of flagship games on consoles and gaming computers (Juul, 2009), needs to be revisited.

Gamerworthiness, instead, takes as its point of departure the self-identification of the gamer within their own conception of play and their range of preferences related to the games they play. The concept of gamerworthiness offers us new possibilities and points of entry into the players' psyche; and holds promise as a tool to enable a holistic charting of ludic journeys.

Key gamerworthy attributes as gleaned through the interviews with the participants in this study:

S.No.	Name	Ideal gamer - looks up to	Ideal gamer description	Context	Attributes
1	Chaitanya	Himself	A person who plays a variety of games on any platform and is well informed	Single Player, Sports-sims loves story-based games and newer adventures	1. Variety 2. Versatility 3. Never gives up 4. Doesn't get frustrated 5. Staying true to their idea of games
2	Ishaan	Brutality (pro League of legends player)	A person willing to put in effort and every move he makes is the right one. Any platform	Game Reviewer, everything	1. Lots of hard work and effort 2. Never give up 3. Analyze the game world thoroughly 4. Experience is key, need to learn from earlier experiences 5. Always adapt and improve play-style
3	Kartik	Cousin in Bengaluru who introduced me to games	A male console game player	Single Player, Sports-sims loves Batman, Mass Effect and FPS'	1. Never gives up and must not take help 2. Adaptable to any kind of game 3. Completionist 4. Learn from the flux and benefit from it
4.	Bhargav	Ishwak, Feroze and Prashant,	Ideal gamer has to be a Cross-platformer	Single Player, Sports-sims loves story-	1. Variety in games played

				based games and newer adventures	2. Ability to jump not only across games but also across platforms 3. Need to research in-depth to pick the right games 4. Completionist
5.	Prashant	-	Someone who gives his all and is willing to develop an all-round skillset	Predominantly Mobile gamer, also sport-sims and SPCs on the side	1. Ability to learn from other players' mistakes 2. Need to perfectly time, develop a knack for making the right move at just the right instant 3. Develop an all-round skillset 4. Adaptable to various games and Platforms
6.	Radhika	=	PC Player with the ability to build his own PC	Predominantly Mobile and Fitness gamer,	1. Need to be able to build the perfect computer for their gaming experience 2. Have the latest knowhow on what is coming when? 3. Play a variety of games 4. Play the latest games
7.	Deepika	-	A player who can play on all three Mobile,	Mobile and GTA enthusiast	1. Play the latest titles

			Console and PC interchangeably		2. Be able to play a variety of games 3. Following in game instructions, rules, narrative plots is key 4. Attention to detail is a must
8.	Vishal	Gaurav MMR Vending Machine	A P.C. Player who plays online multiplayer	plays MOBAS and SPCs	1. Versatility, adapt to different in-game situations 2. Lot of hard work and practice 3. Keep thinking about play, constantly strategizing 4. People willing to play PvP as playing against AI isn't good enough 5. Learn from mistakes 6. Always seek a challenge
9.	Ronik	-	PC Player who can execute the best and most complex moves	Plays MOBAs and MMORPGs	1. Never waste time, resources in game 2. "There is an intensity to their play that can't be matched" 3. Earn the win with best moves/strategy available not just mindlessly grind

					4. Always seek a challenge
10.	Naveen	-	A player always in the search of a new challenge	Plays CS, FIFA and Clash of Clans	1. Seek a challenge 2. Variety and newer experiences 3. Story and Plot are key
11.	Bodavala	-	A player with an eye for detail good reflexes and who has played a lot of games across platforms.	Plays WoW, CoD, Halo and other FPS'	1. Can make quick decisions 2. Eye for detail 3. Good reflexes 4. A sensible and coherent pattern must emerge from his /her decisions to combat Chaos in MMO Universes 5. Cross Platform 6. Versatile 7. Should have played 30 games at least in life
12.	Kannan	Burning (pro DoTA 2 player)	Has to be a PC gamer	WoW, DoTA, Guild Wars 2 predominantly multiplayer	1. Has to be aggressive, willing to take risks 2. Be aware of what is happening 3. Need to Practice 4. Ability to co-ordinate and predict moves 5. Be able to execute plans and strategies
13.	Ram	-	A player who can sit back and	DoTA 2 heavy player	1. Strategizer and Adaptable

			reflect on his in-game actions and improve on them continuously		2. Keen Observer 3. Must play on the PC 4. Dedicated 5. Ability to yell out when frustrated
14.	Ravi	-	A player who knows what to do when no matter what	Plays SPCs and exclusively on Console	1. Able to inhabit game worlds not merely escape into them 2. Need to make the right choices

Table 2: A summarization of all responses to the specific questions on Gamerworthiness.

<u>Analyzing Attributes</u>

The attributes of the ideal gamer, or what goes into 'gamerworthiness' may be derived both from the ways in which the participants described what it takes to be the ideal gamer, as well as the demands of the game. These are detailed below:

Common Attributes

a. <u>Seeking a challenge</u>: Most *Ludic* activities or activities which involve an element of *play* are centered around the need to overcoming an obstacle or solving a problem. Success in such activities is achieved when one provides a solution that solves the quandary while following the rules. *Ludic* activities could range from solving riddles to jigsaw puzzles to large Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPG).
In video games, one often finds that the complexity of overcoming obstacles increases as the players advance to higher levels of the game (Juul, 2005 p.5). Soon problems become more and more challenging, demanding multi-faceted solutions where various factors must perfectly align at the right time. The desire to solve a challenge in order to face one

which is more difficult is what drives players to keep playing and also improve in the process.

> "The design of the game must be such, that the missions I need to accomplish should make me use my skills to the fullest. The game environment and the Artificial Intelligence must try to make sure that there is no room for player error. A challenging/difficult game can be a lot of fun as it allows for a lot of strategizing and careful execution."
> (Chaitanya)

The notion of a challenge becomes even more important in games which are just battle arenas and devoid of a story or a plot. The players who engage in such games are only there to try and win them and as one begins to accrue wins the challenge becomes incrementally more difficult. Massively Online Battlefield Arenas (MOBAs) such as *DoTA 2* and *League of Legends* (LoL) have complex algorithms in place that match-up players with appropriately experienced counterparts.

> "When we are matched up with people higher than our MMR (Match Making Ranking) in *DoTA 2* we realize the gap in our abilities but also begin to play the best we can. We learn from analyzing their moves and decisions and improve our gameplay as a result. We don't mind losing at times, as a challenging game makes us better players."
> (Vishal)

While the importance of overcoming a challenge in a game cannot be overstated, at the same time there is a need to consider the *satisfaction* one derives from overcoming that challenge. As Vishal notes above, clearing a certain level and leveling-up are the in-game rewards that players aspire to achieve but the resultant satisfaction often transcends the

ludic space. Thus, gamers are people in search of newer challenges to overcome and it becomes a key element that defines their identity and personality.

b. <u>Never give up:</u> The trait of never giving up can be viewed as an extension of the seeking newer challenges attribute as players more often than not encounter challenges which are too difficult to clear and consequently ludic progression is halted. At times like these video games as a medium reach a state of impasse as the player cannot engage further till he/she clears the obstacle, forcing the player to keep re-playing the challenge until it is either overcome or the player just gives up.

> "Getting stuck in key-missions and large campaigns is common and something that happens to everyone, however the difficult challenges are a test to what you have learnt from the game. If a player is serious enough then s/he will have to keep trying again and again till they succeed. The cycle of playing and replaying missions is essential, it is preferable if gamers do it by themselves; not seeking help from others." (Kartik)

In an era where gameplay videos from every game are available on streaming platforms such as *YouTube* and *Twitch* (Taylor, 2012) the ability to overcome challenges on one's own has become increasingly rare. Participants of the study felt that players often tend to just "Google" the point where they are stuck at and watch a solution. The use of such *quick-fix* solutions has received mixed responses from players.

> "Sometimes you are stuck because you need an ingenious solution that eludes you, it has got nothing to do with your ability as a gamer but more with if you could see that one miniscule thing that needs to

be arranged in a particular way in order to clear a level. YouTube definitely helps with that, and I can swiftly move on to the more challenging parts of the game." (Bodavala)

On the other hand, players also liken the habit of finding solutions from others' gameplay videos to using a shortcut and "taking an easy way out." However, it is important to note that playing a game needs a player to invest time and money, as considerable effort is needed to acclimatize to a new game-world. It is important that players do not let the effort and resources go waste when they are stuck solving a difficult problem. The ability to "never give up" is essential to the completion of ludic journeys.

"I remember while playing *Rise of the Tomb Raider* I was stuck at a point where I just couldn't find a key part of a puzzle. The harder I tried, the more confused I got. Finally, a week later I just gave up and saw the solution on YouTube. I couldn't give up all those hours I had put in for just a small puzzle, I had to progress forward at all costs." (Naveen)

c. <u>Understanding the rules and mechanics:</u> In his book, *Half-Real* Jesper Juul understands games as rule systems and finds rules to be the pillars around which games are built (Juul, 2005). Games are simulated worlds and are often built as either representations of the actual or are entirely new worlds with inherent systems and rules which are unique (Aarseth, 1997).

The player is expected to experience the world by following the rules of engagement and success in-game is dependent on how soon one can internalize the underlying mechanics

of the game world (Aarseth & Calleja 2009). This is reflected in Vishal's understanding of engagement in the game:

> "Rules in video games are very important, you need to know what you can do and what you cannot, it defines what your Character is and also helps you decide what approach to take in a game." (Vishal)

Mastery of the rules often leads to not only a more holistic gaming experience but also means that one knows the limits of the rules and can manipulate those limits in their favor. It often leads to getting out of tough situations and quicker leveling up which in-turn leads to accessing better rewards and newer content in games.

> "When I was at a Comic-Con in New Delhi there was this game that was being tested out by players and there was not much information given on how it had to played. I remember being one of the only people there not skipping the back-story and text but taking time out to read the instructions. The level was very difficult and impossible to clear otherwise. Reading the instructions helped as I won a very cool looking piece of memorabilia that day." (Ishaan)

Games like *Dead Souls* and *Bloodborne* are notorious for their steep learning curves, extremely complex combat systems and often need payers to master the physics of the weapons they wield and to time their attacks for precisely the right moment. Similarly, a simple game like *Dots* on mobile also has a few moves which are immensely beneficial if the player plays them at the right instant. The gamer needs an internalized understanding of the game world to make split-second decisions and to maintain an advantage over the opponent. The need to then be considered gamerworthy needs for

players to continuously perfect the making of the right split-second decision every single time, a decision that utilizes all that the underlying game mechanics have to offer.

d. <u>Learning from earlier game experiences:</u> The importance of this attribute is two-fold: firstly, the need for a player to learn from his/her experiences from within the game and also as discussed earlier to draw from their experiences of playing other games. Though game-worlds are often built differently, approaches to game-play can be carried forward to other games.

> "I love to play my games stealthily, stealth means a variety of things; in a shooter game, it means using a knife or using a suppressed gun to preferably take headshots. However, in a game like *Assassins Creed* it means using a Bow or blowing darts. Whatever be the game, Stealth involves silent, cautious action which often leaves the opponent unaware. Irrespective of the game I play the rules and benefits of stealth remain the same and I always make it a point to play that way."
> (Chaitanya)

Chaitanya's observation is in line with what other participants (of the study) and the larger gaming community call "metagaming;" a general way or approach to playing games irrespective of the requirements in-game. The "slasher" category of players for instance (Deshbandhu, 2016), will dive right into the game and not consider the rules, narrative or plot irrespective of the game they play. Similarly, an explorer will look for exploration in all the games played and a reviewer will constantly keep sizing up every game played against all the games prior played in a hope to pronounce a verdict. This meta approach to playing games comes from the lifetime of experience players acquire

and the ways they have adapted in order to what they consider is the most suitable way to overcome challenges; the approach then becomes both a player's identity as well as his/her ludic outlook.

> "I love playing games aggressively. The reason I idolize Burning is his aggressive style of play; he plays aggressively no matter what the situation. I have tried to imbibe his aggressive style into my play as well. I have found that the ability to attack and counter-attack with aggression a great way to play all my games." (Kannan)

e. <u>Attention to Detail:</u> The participants felt that an attention to detail for video game players is valuable as one needs to keep track of the game space being constantly reconfigured (Wood, 2012). Most moves are often responses to reconfiguration of spaces and each move affects the game-space in a variety of ways. The player is expected to view the world and analyze the details to plan the next move. The attention to detail is extremely necessary in games where the resources are constrained and there are too many variables at play.

> "In a game like Clash Royale the entire world is dependent on elixir. Elixir is used to launch attacks and defend and thus elixir is always at a premium. I always build my strategies around conserving it and waiting for the opponent's move. All my moves are often in response, in a hope to drain his/her elixir and then counter-attack at the precise moment. I often am mentally calculating the cost of every move and weighing my choices." (Prashant)

In a game like *Clash Royale* the speed of play is very quick as each game cycle lasts about three minutes. Each time a player plays a card the other must not only respond to it but time it to perfection for maximum effect. Attention to detail then becomes crucial in such a game because the players are constantly responding to current moves and future moves in anticipation all the time. Most participants agreed that the need to have an eye for detail is extremely necessary as it is very important for players to observe what happens in-game and quickly observe emergent patterns in order to maximize their chances of winning. Every ludic decision in-game has an effect owing to the recursive nature of the space (Wood, 2012) and thus, the participants argue attentively observing how the game-world and opponent behaves in response helps identify the limits to the responses.

> "One of the most popular games in the Indian context was *Counter-Strike* and I was always playing it for long periods of time. However, I had friends who were much better and who had spent years perfecting their technique. One of them was so good with a sniper rifle that he would carefully wait and observe opponents with regards to the game's breathing mechanism. Each time a character on the screen inhaled his head would rise just slightly and that sliver of a moment was enough for him to take a headshot. Who would have noticed that detail right?" (Ram)

SPC specific

This section looks specifically at the attributes needed by Gamers who play Single Player Campaigns (SPC) and games which have a narrative structure to them. These games are often played against Artificial Intelligence across different levels of difficulty.

a. <u>Variety:</u> Variety is one of the most key attributes as story-bound campaigns over time reach narrative end and the player must then move on (as the replay value of the game declines over time) to a new game. The need for an SPC player to seek newer games and play across genres seems necessary.

> "I refrain from playing multiplayer games because I am in love with experiencing new-game worlds and newer scenarios. I love the huge variety of games that SPCs offer. I am always in search for an exciting plot, a new combat system or anything that makes a game stand out. Playing story bound games gives me a reason to finish them and not be stuck playing the same game forever." (Chaitanya)

b. <u>Versatility:</u> Versatility is the ability of players to switch across various approaches to games to various game genres. Owing to the nature of SPC games players face a multitude of in-game challenges and as a result they must be versatile in their approach and be willing to switch, modify and alter them depending on the situation. A versatile approach to games allows for players to be better equipped to face unexpected situations.

c. <u>Completionist</u>: The completionist trait is essential for story based games as players are expected to reach a logical end to their campaigns. Most SPC players agree that time and money must be invested *only* in games that a player would like to finish. Finishing a game cannot is the most important reward of playing one.

> "When one finishes a game, it means he has bested all the challenges, not only won every battle but also won the war. The satisfaction of watching the end credits roll is unparalleled. We as single player games always seek to finish games, as it is mark of commitment, hard work and sheer dedication." (Ram)

d. <u>Understand the requirements and plots</u>: Over time. the player is expected to build an inherent understanding of the game world and its underlying principles. This knowledge must be used not only to clear challenges but also to figure out the most efficient and optimal ways of leveling up. This becomes extremely important in large role-playing games (RPGs) as players must often choose between weapons, perks, powers and skills as they progress. They must ensure the decisions they make complement their playing style and consequently make progression through the game easier.

> "When I was playing Diablo 3, I had a lot of trouble at the start in clearing levels and just staying alive, but as I progressed and began to level-up I felt my character get stronger and just become a well-balanced character. I realized I had made just the right choices in picking skills and abilities. By the time, I reached the end after putting in close to forty hours, I realized that the final boss battle was a cake-walk. It was hardly a challenge." (Ravi)

Multiplayer Specific

1. This category looks at attributes that players are expected to have in multiplayer games. These games are not built around story-based narratives but focus more on allowing players to combat and match-up against fellow players on the internet.

a. <u>Always adapt:</u> The multiplayer game format unlike the SPC one is unpredictable and has a lot of uncontrollable variables; most games are team based and a player needs to quickly adapt to the playing style of his/her teammates. Every player plays the game in a different way and each player must play in a way that maximizes the team's chances of victory. Team chemistry and the need to "jell together" is essential.

> "Whenever, I play DoTA 2 I always play with characters that enable me to *carry* the rest of my team. I help my team-mates level up by killing the opponents early in game and the time it takes for the opponents to *respawn* is time effectively used by us. When this strategy is perfectly executed, we are far too OP (over-powered) as opposed to our counter-parts. We win the match comfortably. However, every decision I make from the choice of my character, to the perks chosen and items bought is all done by keeping the larger picture in mind." (Vishal)

b. <u>Predict moves and respond in anticipation:</u> This is a trait that can be mastered only by players who have put huge amounts of time in playing a game. The large amount of time put in ensures that the players can soon identify *patterns of play* and predict the *sequence of moves* that are generally used by other players to reconfigure the game space (Wood, 2012). Consequently, the moves played by the experienced players are in anticipation thereby forcing the game into a more *intense state* as each party tries to unsettle the anticipating side in -order to gain an upper hand.

> "I have an MMR of 2500-2800 in DoTA 2 and I am extremely comfortable playing at this level and can win matches without having to over-think or exert myself too much. However, when we partner with a friend of mine the team's MMR is pushed up to 3300-3500. We then experience a much higher level of play, a play that is intense and has no room for error as all our moves are easily predicted and countered. It is an intensity I cannot match for long." (Ronik)

The intensity of play is a crucial element of gamerworthiness, if we were to think of videogame worlds as places akin to the offline world we inhabit; then with experience one's ability to handle a variety of situations increases in ludic spaces as well. Intensity of play then becomes a mix of a player's intuitive grasp of the game world, arising from the sum total of his/her prior ludic experiences, ability to understand the game's underlying rules. A crystalized understanding of all these factors is expected to provide a gamerworthy player the foundation that allows for making the right decisions most of the times, thus increasing the intensity of play consequently.

c. <u>Judiciously use time and resources:</u> The multiplayer is one who is carefully utilizes the time and resources available to the team. The squandering of a resource by one player on a team leads to the under-powering of a fellow team mate and often leads to defeats. Game-worlds are always low on key-resources and their judicious use is a prime attribute that players' must acquire.

> "I love spending the in-game rewards and the resources I collect. I do it very excitedly and try out everything new I can afford. My sister on the other hand takes her time with what she wishes to buy. I have a general idea of what everything does but cannot work the perfect combination that supplements my style of play. My sister though, knows precisely what she wants and buys the things that improve her game. She is better at clearing levels because of her ability to be patient and spend resources at the right time." (Radhika)

d. <u>Aware of changes, flux in games:</u> Multiplayer games are always in a state of change and the knowledge of such games must always be refreshed. Newer play-styles,

strategies and ideas emerge as newer characters, maps and rules are introduced via updates/content packs. The player must always be aware of the latest changes and ensure that all steps are taken to remain updated. However, it is important to note changes seldom leave players happy as they must re-build all their strategies from scratch at times.

> "With World of Warcraft, this is always a thing every time a new expansion is launched the game changes and a new class of characters is suddenly over-powered. I begin from scratch again to *farm* and *buff up* that character in order to benefit and spend considerable time and resources to get that character to Level 100. By the time this happens there is a newer update and I begin the cycle all-over again. I have a total of "twelve" Level 100 characters. This grind is a crucial part of the game." (Kannan)

While this category can be considered an overlap of attention to detail the participants were keen to point out that this category is specific only to games that can be altered by the developer by pushing in a patch or an update. While attention to detail will help players perfect a strategy and find loopholes in-game, being aware of changes will go hand-in-hand and keep the players informed about the need to re-work and re-think game rules and strategies each time changes are ushered in.

e. <u>Learn from others' mistakes:</u> Players learn from their mistakes in all the games they play but Multiplayer games afford them to watch other players in action and analyze their moves. Players must utilize this opportunity and learn quickly form others' mistakes and avoid doing the same ones. There is an overlap between this and learning from past

experiences, while the latter expects players to draw from their reservoir of gaming knowledge and their metagame approach to adapt to the current game, this is more specific to the game at hand.

> "Me and my friends play FIFA's *Ultimate Team* game mode turn by turn. Often, we run into an opponent who is really good and we are unable to beat him/her right away. At such times, I watch my friends play and make sure to notice the opponent's preferences and style and where my friends went wrong. I then build a strategy to counter precisely that." (Prashant)

f. <u>Never Underestimate the opponent:</u> This a trait that is applicable to both sports and e-sports. Players must always prepare for the toughest of matches and never consider a match simple. A relaxed approach often leads to mistakes which can later lead to a defeat. A need to be aware and attentive at all times is a must. As Naveen puts it in his diary, "I cannot count the number of times we have lost a match in *Counterstrike Global offensive*, we thought was easy. We must never let our guard down"

g. <u>Strategize, execute and Reflect on strategies:</u> The need to strategize in Multiplayer games is a must as each player on the team has a different skill-set and style of play. Building a coherent strategy that brings all of them together is a great way to make sense of the chaos that prevails in MMORPGs and MOBAs. Reflection on the strategy in-game and making required modifications takes strategizing a step ahead, as real-time inputs can help incredibly.

Lastly, reflecting on the team's performance post-game and identifying key elements of success and defeat complete the cycle. Players and teams must strategize pre-game, in-

game and post-game much like what Arsenault and Perron theorized in the *Magic Cycle* (Arsenault and Perron, 2008)*.*

> "When we are in for a longer game session which is generally about
>
> 6-8 hours, we strategize after every game. An average DoTA game
>
> lasts about 45 minutes and we strategize for 15 minutes after that. I
>
> sit back and drink some juice as we analyze both he opponents and
>
> our team-mates' moves. Once we are done strategizing we play
>
> again. The strategies are always a work in progress."   (Vishal)

Towards a Contextual Understanding

Most of the above discussed attributes can be condensed to five "super-categories" namely; seeking a challenge, never giving up, understanding a game's rules and underlying mechanics, learning and reflecting on in-game experiences and a willingness to play a variety of games and roles. Attributes like completionist and a desire to improve will be a part of both the seeking a challenge and never giving up as gamers are expected to strive for the most difficult challenges and find ingenious ways to beat them till there are none left.

Similarly, understanding the game's rules and underlying mechanics can mean several things; the most basic being, internalising the game's controls and figuring out the range of manipulations possible and with time and experience players upgrade their understanding to identify the key requirements and plots. This can progress to a judicious use of in-game resources and then the development of an attention to detail which can lead to observation of patterns in-play and thus the judicious use of resources. The development of this set of skills at its finest will allow for players to quickly grasp the changes and flux in games and predict moves and respond in anticipation. The last two abilities players aspire for and work

towards as their understanding of the game reaches a point where they can map the blueprint on which the game has been built. Learning from games is another category whose spectrum can range from a basic understanding of what to do when; to building complex strategies. As players learn from each time they fail they sub-consciously begin to build combinations of successful moves that are to be used for specific in-game situations and with experience and reflection they begin to see flaws in others approaches to games as well as spot things they can imbibe. A gamer who has built a strategy and approach by considering and reflecting on all others will then be both instantly adaptable and versatile as he/she will be able to sub-consciously draw from a vast reservoir of move-combinations and manipulations.

Finally, a willingness to play a variety of games will allow for players to not only experience a variety of game-worlds and thus be aware of a multitude of rule-systems, experience different challenges and newer ways to interact but will also enable gamers to build a uniquely personal metagaming approach that will become an identity marker to the larger gaming community.

It is necessary to understand that improvement on each of the attributes will be acquired by players as a complex aggregate from their ludic experiences and with time depending on the kinds of games they seek to play, the experiences they cherish and their preferences to play they will favour some over the others. It is impossible for a player of single player games to be a team-player or understand the notion of team chemistry as the nature of games played doesn't allow for the development of that particular skill-set. It is impossible for players to gain proficiency in all their skill requirements but gamers are people who are aware of their

deficiencies and have spent hours balancing them and nullifying the weaknesses to the way they play. These skill sets are akin to playing conventional games and sports where practitioners spend numerous hours honing their playstyles and techniques and thus several core attributes overlap between the two realms. The only difference lies in the ever-changing landscape of game-worlds as players here need to constantly work and re-work on their approaches lest they become stale, out-thought and countered by the game-rules themselves.

Gamerworthiness as a framework will allow for aspiring gamers to identify the key skills that they need to imbibe for the games they prefer and reflect on the scope of improvement necessary in order to be worthy of being called a "gamer" by the larger community. We now stand on the cusp of an e-sports revolution that will create a dearth of pro-players. While the aspirants can use this framework to critically appraise and reflect on their abilities, this framework will also allow researchers to comprehend players' proficiency, approaches to play, and hopefully map the complex strategies and thought processes that fuel constant reflexive button mashing.

Though, there have been numerous stereotypes and typologies that have attempted to both define and classify players of video games, but the term *gamer* is analytically as undefinable as the term game (Wittgenstein, 1953; Aarseth & Calleja, 2015). In accordance with the findings of Aarseth and Calleja, it is counterproductive to arrive at a single encompassing definition for the term gamer. This chapter has used ludic journeys and narratives of 3 video game players in a context of *everyday* to arrive at an understanding of the term. The three participants have diverse gaming experiences but the emerging insights suggest that they all

define themselves in relation to the games they play, their patterns of play and the way in which they define themselves in relation to the larger world of gaming.

However, one needs to acknowledge that individual responses to the questions asked were specific, contextual and personal. Their ludic journeys are merely not limited to their in-game existences but need to be understood by unravelling the mangled web of contexts, choices and their offline lives. Game Studies' researchers must strive to identify the common threads across ludic lives in order to have a clearer picture of what it means to be gamer.

Finally, it may be necessary for the gaming world to accommodate a variety of playing styles and devices into the ambit of hardcore gaming, while at the same time acknowledging that even those who use consoles (once thought the preserve of serious gamers) could be casual gamers too. What determines the level of seriousness is not the nature and genre of the game but the amount of time a player puts into it, the level of engagement and attachment that s/he feels and most importantly the value that a player attributes to it. There is a need to accept that if video games are post-modern media (Lister, 2003) and the hallmark of being post-modern is *fluidity* then we cannot have rigid and binary understandings of terms such as gamer and gaming culture. The need to embrace and imbibe contextual knowledge for a more holistic understanding is now more than ever.

Chapter – 4

Charting the Indian Gamescape

This analysis section of the study looks at the participants' gaming habits, practices and contexts from an Indian context, it analyses the participants' responses to general industry trends, reflections on playing practices and their approaches to emerging trends in gaming. This chapter focuses on understanding how newer game developments alter players' psyche, strategies of play and approaches to gaming in general by examining the various steps taken by players to continue the practice of playing video games. This chapter is divided into five sub-sections and each of them grapple with a theme or trend that the participants felt was an important part of gaming in their everyday.

The first of these sections looks at the platforms the players choose and decide to play on and use as an entry-portal to the magic circle. The study causes the participants to reflect on their preferred methods of input, the devices they acquire, maintenance of the said devices and the gamut of factors they consider while making their purchase.

Consoles & PCs: Redrawing Lines of Access

Introduction

Pong, a ludic transformation of the transmission of data packets *ping* is considered the earliest game played on a computer (Pias, 2011) and *Spacewar (1961)* is a derivative of Pong. The term *computer game* originated with *Pong* and the *Dictionary of U.S. Army Terms* defined it as a game computers play against and with each other; a game humans were not supposed to be a part of (Pias, 2011 p. 8). *Spacewar* and its creators at MIT changed that as they hacked *Pong* to allow for user input. Today, it's hard to imagine games not needing human input;

something that causes one to ask the crucial question: *Can Games exist without their players?* A question that can be easily answered by looking at all the video games post-*Spacewar* i.e. they have all needed constant user-input; an act of play cannot be called one unless there is someone playing and the game doesn't begin till someone enters the magic circle (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004)

The players of *Spacewar* built *Atari,* one of the earliest developers of video games and a company that made *arcade gaming* part of mainstream culture. The earliest places where games appeared were in bars and nightclubs, places generally populated by adults and inaccessible to younger players. Around the same time game systems like the *Magnavox Odyssey* were launched as domestic devices to widen accessibility and in the process making video games

Figure 7 A Magnavox Odyssey

"mainstream" by uniting the household as a site of play (Williams, 2005).

The *Arcade Boom* pushed video games into popular culture as people became accustomed to the idea of *interactivity*. The collapse of *Atari* pushed video games into homes as companies like *Nintendo* and *Sega* began to manufacture popular games and console-systems for kids. Williams identifies *Nintendo's* success as one of the prime reasons that caused video games to be redefined as a *province of children* (Williams, 2006). It was only with the mainstream adoption

Figure 8 A Gaming Arcade

of the Personal Computer (PC) that video games for all ages became popular again. The collapse of the gaming arcade accelerated with the arrival of the computer as the older machines could not keep up with the customizability, graphics and ease-of-access that players now enjoyed.

The Rise of PC Gaming was rapid as accelerating developments in computer hardware could now be seamlessly channeled by gaming software and the players had great gaming experiences at their disposal. The remarkable success of Compact Disks made them ideal for shipping of games as large distribution networks were established by publishers. The wide acceptance of PC gaming also spurred developments in the video game console as the *Sony PlayStation* and the *Microsoft Xbox* adopted compact disks in favor of the earlier used cartridges.

Today, the content for the console market and PC market is at par as developers have now begin to make the same content available on all popular platforms. The similarity in the hardware and processing power also enables players to have similar experiences on all platforms. However, the major distinction between the Console and the PC has remained as the former are still closed systems with very limited functionality beyond the play that games offer. However, the PC is much more capable as it is primarily a device of *productivity* that can be used to play games; in essence owing to the larger capabilities of its operating systems the PC offers its users larger interactivity and a wider range of manipulability. The argument is reinforced by the statistic that 80 percent of the youth in Tier 1 cities in India considered the personal computer to be their preferred platform for seeking information and internet usage. (Sharma, 2015)

Targeting specific markets

The markets to which these platforms are cater are different, the video game console is positioned in the market as a player-only device which natively runs video game software specifically built for the platform. On the flip side the Personal Computer can play video games as one of many software applications that are interfaced with the operating system as an additive experience (rather than a native one). In the context of everyday, the logic that determines the device a player invests in is based on his/her purchasing power, their technological requirements from the platform, their choice of games, their style of play and finally the availability of the platform and its accessories.

> "As a student, my ability to buy a gaming device is heavily dependent
> on my ability to convince my parents of my need to play video games.
> Pocket money is often insufficient as the costs of consoles and
> computers are high. The dependence on my parents to buy a laptop or
> a console and then the need to persuade them to buy a new game
> every time I need one is quite a challenging exercise." (Ronik, Personal
> Interview, 20/02/2016)

Though not always the case, the last decade has witnessed a steady decline in prices; which in turn has fueled a rapid adoption of the personal computer across households in India. Owing to their pricing, current generation game consoles in the Indian context are considered both expensive and a luxury acquisition exclusive to the domain of the hardcore gamer and pro-players (Juul, 2010; Taylor, 2012).

"Earlier video game systems like the *Sega Genesis* and the ones from *Nintendo* were affordable but the *Xbox* and *PlayStation* have been priced on par with a computer. It is very difficult to convince one's parents that a video game console is worth the purchase. The computer is viewed as a device for the entire family with features for everyone whereas the video game console is only for the players. All my friends game on the computer, people who own consoles are rare." (Chaitanya, Personal interview, 01/03/2015)

Entering the game-world

The devices also vary considerably in the way they function as entry-points into the game-world. The computer generally relies on keyboards and mice as input gateways, whereas the consoles have predominantly use joysticks that rely on a series of buttons and directional triggers. Over time both platforms have developed steady player bases that have grown accustomed to their preferred tools of entry and engagement.

"I play *FIFA* (EA Sports' Football sports-sim) a lot and it is a game that requires a lot of directional inputs in tandem with button inputs. The directional inputs are necessary for players' movement and the button presses for in-game actions

Figure 9: Joysticks/Controllers for the *Xbox One* and the *PlayStation 4*

such as passing the ball, shooting the ball or sprinting with the ball. On a keyboard one needs to press at least 5 keys at the same time for an action that can be accomplished by a mere two on the joystick. I made the shift from a computer to the *Xbox 360*

when I realized that *FIFA* was the game I played the most and the joystick seemed the most comfortable input method." (Naveen)

"The games I play the most are shooter games (FPS and TPS) and ones with large RPG elements. The best way to play such games is with the classic pairing of the keyboard and mouse. I have tried using a joystick but it just doesn't make sense, shooting with a joystick is arduous and just doesn't seem right as pointing and clicking with a mouse seems intuitive and easy. In RPGs, there are too many controls and too many actions that one needs to take and the limited number of buttons on the

Figure 10: A mechanical keyboard and a gaming mouse, niche offerings.

controllers are restrictive and at times just not enough. My joystick has been lying around ever since." (Kannan)

Though the input-system binary among players seems fitting i.e. players who seek to use joysticks are people who play on consoles and the ones who prefer keyboards and mice are ones on the computer, participants of the study inform me that the dichotomy is superficial. They point out that, the computer owing to its convergent nature allows players to connect joysticks and simulate the experience of a console, similarly players with adequate technical knowhow have managed to subvert the limited functionalities of consoles to attach keyboards and pointing tools.

"As a reviewer, I often receive content for various platforms which needs to be reviewed at the earliest and there is no time for me to re-

adjust to various platforms, their different controllers and various
layouts. I have realized that the easiest way to optimize the process is
to connect a controller to the PC and use controllers throughout. But,
using just controllers is not easy as it sounds as no two controllers are
the same. The *Xbox's* left/right stick are laid out differently than the
ones on the *PlayStation* and internalizing and re-adjusting to the
layout is always a hindrance." (Ishaan)

At this juncture, it is imperative to include playing experience and an ease in internalization of controls in the gamut of variables that players consider while investing in the gaming platform of their choice. It was also observed in the study that over time the participants had developed a certain familiarity and preference for platforms of their choice and one could observe these preferences as the early beginnings of a platform loyalty. The choice of the input methods can be likened to the choice of preferred sporting equipment. Tennis players have often spoken about the kind of racquets they prefer (Roger Federer's shift from a narrower racquet head for instance), the kind of grips they use and the surfaces they are comfortable playing on. However, the participants from the study inform me that the locked nature of gaming platforms and the proprietary control of software and patents on hardware by manufacturers; the players must always make sacrifices as the experience is never the one intended.

"I would really like to play with a PS4 controller on the PC. I have two
of them lying at home but the Microsoft Windows framework doesn't
allow for it. I have tried using third party software and other

workarounds that map the keys but it was never the same as it was on

PS4." (Bhargav)

Loyalty & Market Fragmentation

The gaming platform market is organized on similar lines as the smartphone market as with time big players like *Microsoft*, *Sony* and *Nintendo* have managed to build stables of game developers who proved exclusive and shared content. The participants responses suggested that the relationship between the game ecosystems and the platforms is an important factor that determines their platform of choice.

> "There is a lot that goes into deciding what platform is chosen prior to the launch of a generation. I remember before the *PS4* and *Xbox One* launched *we* (me and my group of fellow players) were constantly debating the pros and cons, we were comparing hardware, the games that would be available at launch, upcoming games, cost of games, value for money and the design of the controller. A lot depends on the first console bought amongst our group as we tend to buy the same ones following that; it's just easier that way." (Chaitanya)

While some participants in the study were very loyal to their platforms of choice, they were aware of the sacrifices they make when they are unable to play the games they desire from rival platforms as the financial investment required to buy another console just to play a few exclusive titles wasn't feasible.

> "I have always loved *Uncharted, Last of Us* and the *Metal Gear* series, games exclusive to the Sony PlayStation. I have always wanted to play them but I also *really really* love playing *Halo, Gears of War* and *Forza*

games available only on Microsoft's Xbox. It's a choice I make every generation when new consoles come out and I always choose Microsoft because my desire to play *Halo* and *Forza* far outweighs the pain of not playing the unavailable games. As long as Microsoft makes these two games they have got me in their *back pocket*." (Bodavala, Personal interview, 01/07/2015)

Though the distinction seems wide, the participants' responses indicated that the playing community was aware of the fact that companies have taken adequate steps to ensure that no genre is left untouched for their players. Content has been specifically developed or sourced to ensure that their players never have a paucity of games but are also provided with games that match-up to each other's exclusive content.

"Microsoft has *Forza* on the Xbox and Sony has its *Driveclub and Gran Tourismo* and for platform neutrals there is always EA's ever favorite *Need for Speed* (NFS). Similarly, *Uncharted* is a historical adventure based in the *Indiana Jones* mould and is available exclusively on the PlayStation. Anticipating its selling prowess and brand loyalty *Microsoft* tied up with *Square Enix* to offer the similarly designed *Rise of the Tomb Raider* as an exclusive on the Xbox. The list is unending, Microsoft has a tie-up with Electronic Arts and this ensures that Xbox players have special content in the *Battlefield* series (First Person Shooter genre) Sony has the same tie-up with Activision for the *Call of Duty* series. There is no shortage of games but the fact that one cannot play the best games made because of platform exclusivity is difficult

to come to terms with. As players, we always want to play the best."

(Ishaan)

However, not all players are loyal to their gaming ecosystems and instead search for the best value in the platforms they choose. Though the industry views the hardcore gamer as a platform loyal customer who always need to plays the latest games (Kerr, 2006) the participants' responses suggest the existence of a hardcore player-base that is "platform agnostic," cautious in investment and averse to the trend of early adoption. These players do not pre-order games and are willing to wait and pick up the games and gaming platforms they desire at lower-prices and only after adequate reviewing by the larger industry.

> "For a gamer value for money is a must. In India, the cost of living isn't as high as in the developed world but the cost of pursuing gaming as a habit is more expensive if not, on-par. The cost of new consoles, hardware and games is increased due to custom duties, taxes and similar bureaucratic red-tape. We pay over and above while earning far less than our global counterparts. We must keep this in mind and accept that we cannot be a *fanboy* of a platform which may not succeed. I had the Xbox 360 in the last generation because it outsold the PS3, had more games to offer and my friends has the same console for us to share games. This generation I have the PS4 for the same reasons. I switched because I don't owe anybody anything." (Bhargav)

This player attitude of being platform agnostic in India seems a natural consequence of a variety of factors. The most important of them being the limited availability of consoles and games at launch coupled with the extremely high prices of gaming gear leaves almost no

room for experimentation with players' gaming choices. It is also important to factor in the financial prudence that the average Indian consumer exercises when making purchases- often controlled by a variety of social and structural factors. Indian players tend to be very conscious of their financial. Similarly, Indian players as individuals are also aware of their financial limitations and their choices are often made by keeping in mind that their financial actions both for games and in-games may cause encumbrances and strife to their offline lives. All the participants that were part of the study were always aware of the financial burden associated with gaming as a hobby.

Intended Experience vs Optimization

Personal Computers are often assembled machines which are modular in nature and consequently are available in the market in a variety of configurations and price-points. The modular nature also allows for users to replace, modify, tune (overclocking for instance), and manipulate specific parts in order to tweak its performance. Video game consoles on the other hand are locked systems with set configurations (not withstanding Valve's failed experiment with *Steam Machines[18]*) at a fixed price-point and often leave users with very little room for manipulation and tweaking.

The rigid/uniform configurations of consoles allow developers to design optimized gaming experiences as the entire experience is only tailored to a fixed set of computing hardware.

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[18] In 2013 Steam tried to launch high performing gaming builds for the living room (another phrase for "console"), while they were expected to be on par with high end gaming pcs, they were also expected to be more modular in nature. The move was expected to herald *Valve* into hardware manufacturing, However, with prices akin to those of high end PCs gamers worldwide failed to notice the allure and sales of the machines have been abysmal to say the least. Since launch (Nov.2103) till date, Steam has sold less than 500 thousand machines, while both Xbox One and PS4 sold more than a million machines each on their launch day itself.

The process of game developing on consoles is often a smoother hassle-free process as all units' function uniformly and can thus be updated easily. The participants feel that the fluid design of the PC though makes things challenging, it is often common practice for players on the PC platform to check for minimum system requirements of upcoming games in order to decide if a game they choose will run on their system. They however point out that minimum system requirements generally do not guarantee a satisfactory play experience, with the industry specifying requirements that are termed "optimal" and even bleeding edge settings that they describe as "ultra."

On the PC market, players must decide the experience they seek and get their gaming rigs ready accordingly. The console players on the other hand have a fixed homogeneity in their playing experiences as the hardware is constant and the developer decides the nature of the experience that is served. Over time the gaming industry and the player community at large has accepted that the most high-end experiences of play (in the most uninhibited form as intended by the developers) are possible only on the PC platform and the most optimized experience is available on the console. It is important for us to understand that the players as *prosumers* of video games must make this conscious choice while choosing gaming platforms.

> "I love everything about *Metal Gear Solid* it is an amazing world with
> fantastic rules and very challenging scenarios. I always strive to get
> the highest possible score in the missions when I play the game. I can
> no longer play it of course, because I no longer find consoles, high-end
> PC hardware a viable investment. I am a student pursuing a bachelors'
> in engineering and a laptop at this juncture is absolutely necessary.

Choosing a laptop also means picking portability over performance and thus my hardware isn't capable to play the games I like. I fretted about it a little and then realized that life as a student is financially tough and I couldn't afford buying games either. I simply switched to *DoTA 2* a free MOBA which doesn't require any flashy hardware. I have been happily playing that for over two years now. (Ram, Diary Entry, August 2015)

Participants in the study who were PC players had begun to understand their Personal Computers as devices that are always in the process of upgradation something akin to the mythological "Ship of Theseus*." They feel that the computer hardware industry views video games as the ideal platform to show their relentless push in processing, graphical innovation often causing players to become the early adopters of technology that becomes mainstream much later.

"I remember buying my first graphic card in 2006 it was very expensive, and then as a high school student I couldn't explain to my parents why I needed a dedicated graphical chip. Games like *Crysis* and *Assassins Creed* needed a dedicated card as a minimum requirement. My parents viewed it as an unnecessary investment for someone not seeking a career in the field of computers. After much negotiation, I finally bought the card and everything on the computer seemed to be so much smoother. Applications like *Skype* and *MS Office* looked better and cleaner, side-effects of the graphics boost. My parents noticed the improvement but could not comprehend it. My

card benefitted the entire family's video usage on the computer but no one understood that." (Kartik)

The participants strongly argue that PC players feel the need to upgrade hardware owing to the lower need for game developers to optimize software for older hardware. They point out that average console cycle lasts for about eight years before the market is refreshed but the hardware for computers is update annually or at times semiannually. In their ludic journeys, most of them had felt a point when their hardware developers had cease to support and provide driver updates; something that happens generally in about three years' time, making gaming on the computer a very expensive practice.

> "For my gaming website, we had tied up with a lot of hardware providers and had managed to build a state of the art computer for gaming and benchmarking. The computer and its parts had a combined retail price of over 1.5 Lakh INR (2,500 USD approx.), money that is extremely difficult to spend in a country like India where incomes are low and taxes, customs make products almost twice as expensive. The computer was a *beast* and an absolute joy to play with, within a year however there was much better hardware available and we could feel our games settings go down from *Ultra* to *High* and the performance dip. The quest for newer, better hardware began, if we as reviewers cannot find the best hardware, then players face a much bigger challenge." (Ishaan, Personal interview, 25/02/2016)

Most of the participants agreed that the optimized experience seems a better investment for players but they point has its own set of shortcomings that players have to deal with, the restricted hardware limits players to a very limited number of functions and multitasking features are nearly impossible. They also strongly felt that the accompanying games are expensive and subjected to the same tax regulations as hardware making the consoles just as expensive in the long run if the player is a Single Player Gamer who plays a variety of games.

> "The console is cheaper in terms of hardware but the games are expensive. Also towards the end of a console generation you can feel that the optimization doesn't make up for aging hardware. You can feel the resolutions *drop* and the framerates *stutter* as experiences become *laggy*. Once the newer consoles launch you also realize that there is hardly any newer content for your system. The internal hardware cannot be tampered with and the only option we have is to buy the newer console and watch as our older library of games becomes unplayable. Problems like these don't exist on the PC, but the cost of maintaining an updated computer are high and the *effort* is too much. The permutations and combinations of the hardware are too many, a console is just so much easier and if you can wait it out you get some really good prices for an upgrade." (Kartik)

In November 2016, Kartik upgraded to a PlayStation 4 almost three years after its launch and the device cost him 40 percent less than at launch; a decision he calls "wise" and "value filled." This debate between intended and optimized experiences has permeated all facets of

our digital lives today. As we fidget with aging smartphones, slow computers or digital instruments that have become unresponsive and clunky over time, we constantly grapple with the need to acquire newer, better devices in a hope to be engaged with smooth, responsive experiences that truly make these complex technological contraptions the extensions to our physical and cognitive selves. The speed of converting thoughts to digital action has made quantum leaps in the last decade, with the availability of ergonomic and haptic devices. However, in this unending HCI loop we must contend with this debate of cost vs effectiveness forever till we find newer ways of building that can make upgrading specific parts simpler, affordable and accessible maybe re-think modularity in the process.

Mobile Games: New Rules of Engagement

The second sub-section of this chapter looks at the participants' responses to gaming on mobile phones and their understanding of the platform's evolution. This section specifically focuses on a variety of key concepts such as the players' choices in the games they play, their approach to the freemium turn in the mobile game industry, their responses to micro-transactions and their adjustment to the need of repeated-logins.

A Brief History of Mobile Gaming

A simple way to unpack the term *mobile games*, would be to understand *mobile;* a device which continues to function while the user is on the move. Then mobile games as a term must encompass all portable devices ranging from laptops to handheld gaming consoles and games on the cellular phone. However, it would be simpler for the purposes of this discussion to eliminate laptops (they are full-blown computers after all) and only look at devices which are designed to be literally held in the hand.

Handheld gaming devices have been in use for four decades now, *Gamasutra's* Barton and Loguidice describe Mattel's *Auto Race* (1977) as the first *all-electronic* handheld game. The commercial success of Mattel's subsequent titles like *Football* and *Battlestar Galactica* led to not only the development of the *Intellivision Master Component* but also created a nascent market for handheld games (Barton and Loguidice, 2008).

The handheld video game market since then has provided an omni-present extension to video games in general as over the years devices such as *Brick Games*, *Game Boys* (Nintendo) and the *PlayStation Portable* (PSP) (Sony) have become fixtures in mainstream culture. The Gameboy franchise in particular has been extremely popular with the

Figure 11 The Brick Game, Nintendo 3DS and the Sony PlayStation Portable

player base worldwide, as Nintendo has launched five different models across six generations of gaming before spinning off Game Boy into the *DS* franchise in 2004. Popular Nintendo gaming series include *Mario, Donkey Kong, Pokémon* and *Zelda*. Sony on the other hand has been a direct competitor to Nintendo since 2004 with the launch of the PSP and other devices such as the *PSP Go* and the *PS Vita*.

Gaming on the cellular phone follows a different trajectory and is far more recent compared to the traditional handheld gaming console. Osborn (2014) traces the earliest mobile game to Finnish developer Taneli Armanto and his 1997 game *Snake*. The game was a re-adaptation of David Bresnan's version for the BBC Micro, and Nokia shipped the game titled *Snake II* on a plethora of its monochrome devices. Owing to the game's simplistic design and the sheer popularity of Nokia as a phone manufacturer, close to *350 million* people played it making it one of the *most played* games across all platforms (Osborn, 2014).

Figure 12 Armanto and Nokia's *Snake II* on the Nokia 1108 with the iconic moonlight display

Mobile phones as a technology form have seen several spurts of evolution in the last two decades and the industry is accustomed to the trend of *technological leapfrogging* by most players (Napoli & Obar, 2013). The monochromatic devices made way for colored ones and the underlying software matured as phones' hardware was optimized for software packages such as *Java* and *WAP* (Osborn, 2014). Games like *Snake* and *Space Impact* made way for *Bounce* and *Rally Master Pro* for the first-time mobile phone users weren't restricted to the games their phones shipped with and now had the option to *side-load* the games they wished to play. The participants of the study informed me about the constant need to check if they games they side loaded would function with the devices they owned and the need to tinker and modify things in order to get an effective experience.

> "Playing games on the *Java* platform was such a hit and miss thing, you had a bunch of websites from where *.jar* files could be downloaded. You needed to not only find the right compatible screen-size of the

game but also needed the underlying Java architecture to be

compatible. It was a lot of fun as you were never sure what worked

and what didn't. The tinkering and adapting to make games work was

one of the most *fun* elements." (Bodavala)

However, games on the mobile phone were ideal for the audience and Nokia realized that

the success of *Snake* and *Bounce* could be taken a step further and

in a bid to compete against the traditional hand-held gaming

market the Nokia *N-Gage* was launched. The abnormally shaped

phone was one of the earliest indicators that the mobile phone

could be a site that *hardcore* gamers (Juul, 2010) could associate

with. However, Nokia's engage experiment wasn't successful as the

phone was poorly received by the audiences at large.

Figure 13 The Nokia N-Gage launched in 2003, very similar in design to Nintendo Game Boy Advance

The Smartphone Revolution

Gaming on phone received its biggest boost with the launch of the iPhone in 2007 and the

birth of the *smartphone*. The iPhone revolutionized the mobile phone market with its

computational and processing power. *Blackberry's* CEO Mike Lazaridis described the first

iPhone as a "full-fledged computer inside a phone" and the worldwide acceptance of the

iPhone and Google's subsequent mobile OS *Android* led to the end of the *Java* platform on

mobile devices (Ritchie, 2013).

The increase in processing power coupled with digital markets which sold or shared

software with users led to the Smartphone revolution as digital stores were soon stocked up

with a plethora of *apps* (applications), each programmed to achieve a specific purpose. The

user simply had to access the store via the internet and the apps were easily downloadable. The compatibility of devices was no longer a crude process but a refined maintenance procedure as entire ecosystems have been built around *iOS* and *Android*. The development and maintenance of these ecosystems has become a major barrier for entry of other mobile operating systems as not being able to provide the users with the right apps at launch is considered a failure. As more and more apps enter the fray, the market domination of Apple's carefully curated *App Store* and Google's extremely large *Play Store* has effectively rendered the smartphone space a *Duopoly*.

Games on smartphones were not only smooth and better looking because of the increase in processing power but also different because of the *capacitive touchscreen* display. Players no longer had to mash keys and styluses on their phone while playing games but now had the phone's entire screen to engage with through touch and movement. As user inputs on mobile screens became smoother and more responsive, new ways of interaction such as *taps, pinches, swipes* and *scrolls* could now be used. Game developers soon realized the potential for developing a variety of new gestures and gesture-based input systems.

Some of the most popular games on smartphones are *Angry Birds*, *Temple Run*, *Fruit Ninja, Candy Crush Saga, Subway Surfer, Flappy Bird, Clash of Clans* and *Real Racing.* The number of games available to play on a smartphone today is practically unlimited, as newer innovative games emerge every week across genres. The mobile phone today is the most popular place to play video games as more than 27 percent of worldwide video game revenue was from the mobile platform in 2015 (Newzoo Games, 2016).

Games on Mobiles: Trends

The increase in popularity of mobile games has also seen the emergence of new trends unique to the platform as developers have attempted to entice players with a variety of offerings. The trends are discussed in detail below:

a. Free Games:

For a mobile game to be successful, it must draw a large number of players. The visibility of games needs to be high and the barrier of entry to play low in order to stand out from competing games on the digital app store. The participants feel that making a game available for free is one of the quickest ways to ensure visibility, and also cut down on piracy. A few of them pointed out the trend where, the popular games on both Android and iOS ecosystems are free to access as players on mobile have an enormous number of innovative titles to choose from.

> "Mobile gaming is all about being *free*, the best games on the mobile
> platform are free. Sometimes there are some games which are really
> good but need to be bought, I just find a similar free game which works
> on the same principles. However, when I badly need to play a paid
> game then I just *torrent* (P2P file sharing system) it. The cracked *APK*
> files of most of these games are pirated soon anyway." (Naveen,)

b. In-game Advertising

The need for free games to monetize and stay commercially relevant is a key element in the game development cycle for mobile games. Mobile phone developers have begun to envision their game software as media products and view their player base as audiences. The game

software then becomes a *dual market* site (Picard, 2005) as the players view their *in-game* content as a market and the game developers sell their player base as a market for advertisers. Participants of the study were aware that most popular mobile games have a variety of in-game advertisements as a way of recovering their costs of development.

> "Mobile Games are filled with ads and we are used to it. If a game is being given to play for free, then we as players need to support the developer by watching the ads. Over the years, I have learnt how to tune-out and not even notice the ads anymore. Sometimes games have unique methods where players are rewarded for watching the ads completely. Like in *Score Hero* a football game, you get special in-game currency for watching ads, it is a welcome change when game developers don't take players for granted." (Prashant)

Time-based Lockouts

Mobile as a platform is all about portability and on the move. Consequently, the sessions of *play* designed are for shorter periods of engagement as opposed to conventional gaming platforms (consoles, PCs) where marathon sessions of play are the norm (Keogh, 2014). Participants of the study felt that game developers encourage players to play a larger number of sessions for shorter bursts of time and encourage frequent repetition of the game cycle. They were keen to point out that most free2play mobile games often have core resources which are limited and all acts in the game-world cause an exhaustion of these resources. Players can't play further when the resources are completely depleted and have to wait for a certain period of time before re-commencing the game cycle.

> "In a game like Candy Crush for instance, lives are limited in number
> (often three) and each time you fail to clear a level you lose a life. So,
> if you are stuck at a tricky level you may end up losing all your lives.
> When this happens, you're stuck and can't give the challenge another
> try as you must wait for the game to restore your lives." (Deepika)

c. <u>In-App Purchases</u>

In-app purchases are another revenue generation model that is a hallmark of the mobile game industry. Mobile game developers encourage players to purchase a variety of things in-game by paying for them in *real money* in order to progress quickly through games. The mobile playing contingent of the participant pool indicate that in-app purchases could range from a variety of perks for players from relaxation of time lockouts or achievement of newer abilities and perks or sometimes just quicker leveling up of characters.

Developers encouraging players to pay money for in-app purchases is an effective strategy, as up to the first purchase the gameplay experience has not only been an effective demonstration of gameplay and the game-world but has also ensured that the players have spent considerable time and resources and feel the investment is worth that effort. Following the purchase, the players' engagement to the game intensifies as the player now seeks a value-for-money experience (for the money spent in the first transaction) which can consequently lead to further purchases in the long run.

> "In App purchases are not very expensive and sometimes you get
> access to limited edition content. The best thing is these purchases are
> not very pricey and their low price makes the investment tempting. I

remember buying Usain Bolt on *Temple Run 2* it was one of the best purchases I ever made. I always wanted to run like Bolt and be the fastest ever and I immediately bought him. It wasn't a difficult decision to make and running with Bolt was absolutely worth the investment." (Kartika, Personal interview, 07/02/2015)

The combination of free games with in-app purchases has led to the rise of a *freemium* (Alha et al., 2014) economy of mobile games. Mobile games today are permeated with avenues of micro-transactions that encourage players to take the easy way out and avoid the *grind* by paying money. However, the participants believe that software developers need to balance the effort put in by free-to-play players against a desire to cash in, this balance needs to be carefully managed as an overzealous drive to maximize revenues could cause a decrease in the player-base.

"I respect people willing to pay money to overcome a challenge but it is also important that players who are willing to put in the effort are rewarded. Sometimes, no matter how hard you try; you realize that players can't progress without putting in money and that hurts. You realize all your time and effort has been a waste, you feel cheated." (Prashant)

New ways of Play and Engagement

Gaming on cell phones has seen the emergence of new ways of play and at times causes us to re-examine several key terms and assumptions about gaming culture. This section critically examines the newer ways in which players on the mobile platform have begun to engage with their games in a construct of the *everyday* (Couldry, 2003).

a. "Always On" play

Drawing from danah boyd (boyd, 2012), 'always on' is a phrase that perfectly summarizes gaming on the mobile platform. Just like Boyd's understanding of the use of applications that natively integrate the internet, gaming on mobile phones is no different. The apps developed for smartphones today are natively integrated with internet technologies and consequently, the games are seamlessly designed for an always on internet connection. From notification alerts to fixed time-based login rewards the gamer on the platform is always on as well. Mobile gaming has become a lot more mobile as game developers efficiently utilize the offerings of network technologies like *3G, 4G* and *LTE*. Participants in the study observe that high speed and affordable data connections from cellular service providers have made game modes such as PvP (player vs player) incredibly popular in games such as *Clash of Clans*, *Clash Royale*, *Deck Heroes*. They feel this offers the gamer the possibility of continuous engagement with a game no matter where he/she is, obviating the need to be close to or within range of a fixed broadband connection.

> "A few years ago, I needed to differentiate between the games that
> were to be played at home (by connecting to a Wi-Fi connection) and
> those that could be played anywhere as they didn't need internet.
> However, since 2012 and the mass roll out of 3G services in India, I
> don't really have to care. I can power up my games anywhere, while
> sitting in a cab in traffic or while taking a break from work at office. I
> can begin playing the moment I wish." (Kartik)

b. Re-defining hardcore

Juul (2010) and Kerr (2006) define *hardcore* gamers as people willing to play the *latest and greatest* of games available. However, it appears that this may not necessarily apply to mobile games as data from the participants suggests that successful games take considerable time to gain traction and establish a loyal (often global) customer/player base.

> "In the case of AAA titles (flagship games) for the PC and Consoles, players are often waiting for the games that are about to launch and have already planned what games to play at what time of the year. However, that is not the case with mobile games as a game that launches today may not exit 30 days down the line, as the studio may just pull it off the play store as it was not noticed enough. In mobile games, you need to carefully wait and watch; watch how players adopt a game and play it, carefully examine reviews and only then can you start playing the game." (Prashant)

Mobile game developers also lack the large publicity/advertising machinery that is at the disposal of large gaming studios who cater to the PCs and Console market. The inability to charge players for games is also a huge deterrent to large scale marketing campaigns as revenue generation is contingent to wide acceptance by the gaming community, any form of monetization is difficult up to that point.

c. Scheduled play

With games integrating time-lockouts as a way of encouraging micro windows of engagement and in-app purchases, participants indicate that; players have developed a schedule around their in-game activities. By understanding the underlying game dynamics, players now anticipate when their resources are re-filled and when the game has specific

incentives, bonuses for players (rewards for daily log-in, free gifts in regular intervals) and have planned their schedules and activities around them to efficiently maximize their engagement in-games.

> "I play this game called Deck Heroes which offers a daily log-in bonus
> at 12 AM Canada time, so every morning at 10.30 IST (Indian Standard
> Time) irrespective of what I am doing, I log-in to the game and claim
> my rewards and finish my daily tasks in the game to expend my
> energy (key resource in the game). The game also has 4 specific
> windows throughout the day when I have to log-in to be rewarded
> with bonus energy. The specific times in IST are 6.30 PM, 10.30 PM,
> 2.30 AM and 6.30 AM. I strived hard to claim all the bonus energy to
> progress in-game. It meant I would sleep by 2.30 AM and wake up by
> 6.30 AM. It was hard work and extremely exhausting. I soon found a
> work-round by sleeping at 11 PM setting an alarm for 2.30 AM,
> claiming the reward and going back to sleep." (Prashant)

The factoring of game's time mechanics into the daily schedule, as Prashant describes, has become the norm for any player serious of playing on the mobile platform as they seek to maximize the efficiency of their limited windows of engagement. This trend of time-shift that Prashant mentions has permeated the ludic practices of F2P players in India as these mobile online game worlds are always "live." The timelines of these games are also better attuned towards the West and the best that Indian players can expect is when a game follows Greenwich Median Time.

"The repeated logging-in is addictive and very engaging as you are often thinking at the back of your head when you need to log-in next and what needs to be done then, it is like you are never logged-out at all. It is often very distracting and at times very annoying, but the other alternative is to pay for in-app purchases or entire games; Time is money has never been truer." (Kartik)

d. Seeking a value for money and effort

In a world of smartphones filled with micro-transactions and in-app purchases players have begun to search for the maximum value for effort and money they can squeeze out of their *limited* time of play. Data from the study suggests that, players attempt to progress the best they can by spending the least amount of money. They begin to identify periods in the game-cycle when discounts appear in-game to pick up required bonuses.

"The games I specialize in are *diner* based games, I specifically look for games that offer me more complex ways to manipulate the play area, work with newer objects and streamline game-play actions. However, I realize the best games in this genre are not free to play as the genre is a niche one. I then begin to search for the games that offer me the most at the least expensive price. Sometimes a game is cheap to begin with but has only a limited number of levels or cheap but riddled with more in app purchases. I account for all of these parameters carefully and only then make the purchase." (Radhika).

Analysis of the data suggests that players are in the constant search for value in their ludic engagement. Value here can be understood as the amount of fun a player can have and the

amount of time it can be had for. In the freemium design of mobile games the developers sacrifice on one of the two variables in order to cause a discomfort that will nudge players to pay for benefits. Players on the other hand are constantly looking out for games that will reward their time and effort the longest without having to compromise on the levels of fun.

Whaling and F2P

Two of the broader outcomes of the *freemium* mobile economy is the *whale* and the *F2P*. The F2P is a player who plays for free and is not interested to put money in to the game-system for acquiring the benefits the game has to offer. The *Whales* on the other hand are people willing to invest significant amounts of money into the game to acquire the best of what is on offer. As Gamasutra's Mike Rose defines them, whales are people who spend the money in F2P games that is used by the company to ensure that the other 99 percent can play the game for free (Rose, 2013). The Whales can be viewed as a balancing mechanism in the freemium economy, it is their desire to acquire the best that drives them and also the game developers' revenues, in the process ensuring that the game and its services remain available to the rest.

Participants of the study believe that Whales are generally despised by the larger player community as they often have an advantage in terms of equipment and abilities when compared to F2P players. The participants' responses also point to the fact that the larger gaming community believes; the only reason whales are better is because of their willingness to spend exorbitant amounts of money.

> "In most mobile games with a PvP element you realize that hard-
> work and dedication can only take you so far, no matter how

hard you scheme and strategize there is a glass ceiling beyond

which there are only big-spenders. It is impossible to be the best

in a mobile game without spending money as developers give

the best only to big spenders. The gulf between the Whales and

F2P is too wide. We might be of the same level and I might be a

much better player but it doesn't matter as the benefits of

spending money makes them unbeatable. However, on the off-

chance *if* you beat a whale, the satisfaction is simply unmatched.

Something to live for, it vindicates all your efforts and time, but

such instances are very rare." (Prashant)

On the other hand, participants suggested that a lot of players in the larger community

believe that spending real money in-game is similar to cheating and it makes the cycle of play

unfair as F2P players can never match big-spenders.

"I make it a point never to spend money in games, I hate in-app

purchases and I play the best I can by playing for free, when I realize

I can't progress anymore, I simply move to a newer game. Mobile

games can't be finished most of the times anyway, I just play till I get

bored." (Kartik)

While none of the participants in the study were ever *whales* in their gaming lives, most of

them echoed the sentiment that people on the upper end of the socio-economic latter were

the only ones who could involve in the practice. The players however felt that just having

money to spend wasn't the only necessary criteria to become a whale but also the strong

desire to have the best a game can offer. Ishaan in particular views the whales as a necessary problem in an era that is slowly edging towards a largely *F2P* model but he is also worried that for the first time hard-work, a deep understanding and ingenuity in a game world can be overlooked if a player has the right amount of money. With the e-sports revolution just around the corner this makes intensity of ludic engagement that much more difficult to entangle.

Is Mobile Gaming Casual?

Consalvo (2009), Shaw (2012) and Deshbandhu (2016) argue against the simplistic binary that is the casual player and hardcore gamer prevalent in the mainstream understanding of game culture. Mobile gaming has often been understood as the domain of casual gamers as games on the mobile platform aren't *worthy* to be classified under the hardcore tag. The need to embrace a more diverse and complex understanding of gaming culture at this juncture is essential.

Players on the mobile platform put in just as much effort and intensity into their sessions of play as do players on the console platform. In addition, their ability to battle the challenges thrown up by the freemium economy may deserve appreciation. Putting in huge amounts of effort knowing that their likelihood of winning/completing a game is highly unlikely indicates their passion and commitment to the platform.

> "I know that we mobile gamers are not considered serious enough, most of us are likened to players of games such as *Candy Crush* and *Temple Run.* I have been largely playing three games in the last two years *Clash of Clans*, *Clash Royale* and *Deck Heroes* and I put in at least

an hour each for each of them every day. The need to keep logging in throughout the day for three different games at three different sets of times is exhausting. I have never seen hardcore gamers from Xboxes and PlayStations having to juggle three different games at a time. I remember games like *Dragon Age Inquisition* and *Witcher 3* being more than a hundred hours long and when players finish these games they can be called gamers, but I have put in more than 500 hours on Clash of Clans alone, and I have to justify why I deserve to be called a *gamer*." (Prashant)

The participants of the study were aware of the existence of the popular belief amongst the larger gaming community that games on the mobile platform aren't good enough and the players who choose to play on mobile are people who do not have regular access to conventional gaming platforms. However, several of the mobile players group in the study pointed out the ease of access and playing on the go as key factors that conventional platforms do not provide.

"I have a PlayStation but the ability to play it is extremely limited. I need to be at home and also be able to set aside a few hours every time and that is not possible all the time. There are moments when you want to quickly play a game and the phone is the easiest device to play on. The phone is truly anywhere and everywhere." (Kartik)

The participants in the study who play across platforms have found the mobile platform liberating and have embraced the openness in the market. They feel that the conventional video game market is extremely organized and the big publishers like *Electronic Arts*, *Ubisoft*,

Square Enix and *Activision* have dominated the market leaving very little breathing room for independent developers. The mobile platform on the other hand has been extremely difficult to predict as the player base is vast and the need for continuous innovation is high. Sequels to popular games such as *Angry Birds* and franchise based businesses have failed to dominate the market.

> "I don't play on the mobile platform because I don't have access to other platforms, instead I play on the phone because the best games are made for mobile. The most players in the world today play on mobiles and that is a clear indicator that the best developers and games are being made for phones." (Radhika)

Lastly, players from the study have found the above-mentioned key factors the ease of availability and access that players enjoy on smartphones invaluable. While players have had to scour different shops and stores to find their games (in the past) for conventional video game platforms, the smartphone era ensures that any game a desire is just a couple of taps away, a trend that has now been mimicked by services such as Steam, PlayStation Store and the Xbox Live store today.

> "The easiest thing I like about playing on the phone is, I can play any game I like. I don't have to play a particular game or a particular kind of games. I sometimes don't even read the reviews on the games. One of the most recent games I played, I saw it on a vine, liked the video and tapped install. In a couple of seconds, I was ready to play; something like this could never happen on any other platform." (Deepika)

Shipping Half Baked: Updates, DLCs and Early Access

The third sub-section deals with the transformation of the video game from a fixed "product" that is locked post-production to a fluid and ever-changing "service" where the developers can alter the underlying code by pushing out updates, patches, glitches and extra (often premium) content using the internet. This section analyses the video game as a fluid, ephemeral site of play and the players' responses to the industry wide service transformation. It specifically analyses newly emerged trends such as the developers rolling out updates, patches, special downloadable content, the change in video games' shelf life and the problems that players face since these developments.

Internet and Video Games

Despite the significant influence that the integration of Internet has had on the video game industry and vice-versa, it is important to recognize that "networked play" on computer terminals emerged much before the World Wide Web. By repurposing the unique offerings of the *Plato Time Sharing system* the "online" community at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign had managed to develop multiplayer games like *Empire* and *Spasim* in 1978 (Woolley, 1994). The arrival of the internet led to a large-scale information revolution, forever transforming the experience of using a computer. Being connected to a network of networks (Poster, 1997) not only allowed users to access information from networks beyond their physical reach but also led to the availability of opportunities where applications could use this connection natively to achieve a variety of objectives.

Programs and services like Multi User Dungeons (MUDs) and their object-oriented versions (MOOs – an early forerunner to the more popular MMORPG) can be termed as early versions

of such connected *apps* (for the lack of a better word) (Shah & Romine, 1995). MUDs used the internet as a bridge to connect like-minded *adventurers* to traverse textually bound and verbally detailed realms that were limited only by the players' imagination. Turkle in particular explores the experiences and identities that were forged by online interactions in MUDs and offered insights that were instrumental in enabling researchers to break the *real-virtual* binary (Turkle, 1995).

However, despite their inherently interactive nature MUDs were largely textual environments that are not comparable to the graphically rendered game worlds of today. Though the rule systems and the underlying mechanics of a particular MUD might be identical to a modern MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* or *Guild Wars* the experiences of play are often incomparable.

The ability to integrate internet into their systems allowed video game developers to build entire sections of the game where players could play against each-other rather than be limited to merely combating the programmed Artificial Intelligence. This led to the rise of two distinct game modes in AAA (flagship) video game titles where the Single Player Campaign (SPC) focused on the narrative elements the game had to offer (the plot, story) and the Multiplayer Game Mode which focused on the *ludic* elements of the game by allowing the players to match up against each other without having to deal with the story elements.

 Moving away from in-game systems, access to internet also allowed developers to collect information about how players played their games and thus provided an easy route to obtain in-game information about errors, crashes, and glitches. This information on collection could then be used to push updates which fixed these problems (Tyni & Sotamaa, 2011). The use

of internet also allowed developers to share early game content as well as provide sections of a game in development to their player base for testing (either Alpha or Beta).

After the arrival of high-speed *broadband* internet developers were able to provide better services to players and games were soon also being *pirated* and *bootlegged* across a variety of platforms as large sized file downloads became possible. To combat this the internet developers used Digital Rights Management (DRM) technologies which were heavily reliant on the internet to periodically check the authenticity of the game at times of play. Today, the use of internet in the video game industry has grown manifold as games are not only played online but also purchased online and downloaded on the console/mobile/computer from cloud-based software repositories around the world.

Updates:

Updates are one of the most important elements of video games in the modern era. Prior to the launch of the internet it was impossible to track every copy of a game to fix it. Earlier games followed the same distribution channels like books as on the launch of a game it hit the stores and when players acquired them, they were expected to install the software. If the software wasn't functioning as envisaged by the developers there was no way for the problems to be resolved, today with the arrival of the internet all legitimate copies of the games are activated online at the time of first installation and the developers can monitor the game's performance. Over time fixes, patches and other improvements are pushed via the internet in the form of updates.

Owing to the fragmented nature of the Personal Computer (PC) market game developers also have to cater to a variety of system configurations as the gaming software must be optimized

separately for each variant of the processors and graphic chips. The participants of the study point out that it is not just enough to have compatible hardware on gaming devices, but there is also a need for constant software support (called *drivers)* to keep the hardware running optimally. A "tedious task" that they claim has been smoothened by the tie-up of large gaming companies with graphic card manufacturers like *NVidia* and *ATI*.

> "The need for driver updates is extremely important and a lot of times you realize that though your hardware is capable to run a game smoothly, it fails to do so because the drivers haven't been updated. Earlier it was extremely difficult to keep track of the various driver updates that companies pushed out, some driver installs broke things rather than repairing them. Now, things have become a lot smoother the latest compatible drivers can be installed with the click of a mouse, sometimes companies also give you the best preset settings in-game for the best gaming experience." (Chaitanya)

Similarly, the participants point out that sometimes updates are also pushed to improve or add in-game content as games have become dynamic in nature and developers can now not only push new content but also limited time-based content which expires after a stipulated time period.

> "It is really cool to play games where the developer rewards you depending on the time of the year. If you take *FIFA* for instance there is a whole series of events called *FUTMAS* during the Christmas period where players get special rewards daily for logging in during the period. Similarly, in my other mobile game *Deck Heroes* I get rewards

for a variety of events like Thanksgiving and New Year's. Games just

seem better when you get rewarded during the festive period."

(Prashant)

a. Fixing games

Updates are viewed as a way for developers to fix problems with the games when they launch, a lot of times the *gold-mastered* version of the game experiences problems as it is extremely difficult to test for every possible scenario in-game. However, post-launch the player base begins to look for possible Easter-eggs, workarounds and glitches in the game. Explorers (Bartle, 1996) in particular seek to find the exploits at the earliest in order to establish their credibility in-game. The developers use the feedback from the player community to fix the problems.

> "I was extremely excited to play Rocksteady's *Batman Arkham Knight*
>
> on my computer as it offered players the opportunity to play with the
>
> Batmobile for the first time. In a way, I could actually be Batman and
>
> drive his car. However, the game was unplayable at launch; the team
>
> working on the PC version had not optimized it and there were just
>
> too many lags and stutters. It took nearly *four months* for the game to
>
> be fixed. It was a great game after the patches, and absolutely worth
>
> the wait." (Chaitanya).

The participants feel that this ability to fix games is paramount for the playing and developer community as it blurs the user-developer binary as the latter actively seeks player feedback and at the same time offers them a prolonged window which can be used to rectify the mistakes and keep the game on sale. Most participants were keen to point out that the same

problem (with *Arkham Knight*) in a pre-update world would have not only caused mass-returns and refunds but would have also ruined the franchise for gamers.

b. Unrealistic deadlines?

Over the years' games have become larger and more complex. Game worlds have not only become larger in the terms of charted area but massive worlds have been simulated and re-created with a large number of overlapping variables. Gaming projects have become extremely ambitious as games like *No Man's Sky* and *Star Citizen* have attempted to re-create a play space that mimics the entire universe. As game worlds continue to expand and become *meta-ludic* realms (games within games) the difficulty to design and test the vast expanse increases manifold. The time, effort and financial resources required to create a flawless environment is significant making their development a massive gamble.

Reflecting on the publicity machinery that big game studios have at their disposal participants indicate the developers' need to get the worldwide player base interested in a project and to achieve that carefully executed marketing campaigns use events like the "Electronic Entertainment Expo" (*E3)* to showcase their early game-footage and trailers. These events are used to create massive amounts of *buzz* and *hype* among the players fueling a demand in an audience that cannot wait for the product.

> "A day one update for a game is a given, no matter what happens you
> plug in the game for the first time and there is a large sized update
> waiting for you right there. Ideally a game should work in its entirety
> on day one but that has not been the case for any game in the last four
> to five years. I remember plain a game called State of Decay, a game

that was 5 Gigabytes (GB) in size but on day one had a 3.5 GB update.
What did they do, launch a whole new game as an update? It is
ridiculous at times. In a country like India Internet bandwidth is
limited and expensive." (Ishaan)

Most participants acknowledge that the "day one patch" is a trend that is likely to stay for a long period of time as it is now possible to mass-alter the gold-mastered version of video games. The time period between the day of gold-master release and the actual launch is now used by developers to fine-tune the final product (Ismail, 2016).

Developers are creatives working on a commercial schedule, leading to
the ancient and never-broken rule that a developer will always be two
weeks late for their deadline – no matter how big or small the deadline
is. (Rami, 2016; paragraph 4.)

c. Nerfing and Overpowering

With the arrival of the internet video games today are a truly dynamic medium, the developers can now alter everything in the game ranging from the rules to the underlying mechanics, the consequences of the alterations are sometimes minor tweaks in the gameplay and at times they can usher in across-the-board shifts. Developers now are more receptive than ever to the voice of the playing community and factor in their feedback into the changes (Tyni & Sotamaa, 2011).

"Nerfing" is one such step by which a developer attempts to level the playing field in a particular way by reducing the effect of an in-game property on the game world. The

participants of the study understand the developers' use of Nerfing either as an act of restoring balance or at times a carefully strategized nudge to alter the players' playing styles.

"The nerfing of *Gjallarhorn,* a rocket launcher in Destiny was a massive step in the game. It was an extremely rare rifle that had the capacity to cause unparalleled damage in the game, giving its possessors a distinct advantage over the rest. The entire class of rocket launchers was overpowered and most players felt the only way to beat

Figure 14: Destiny's Gjallarhorn Rifle

tougher opponents was to acquire a Gjallarhorn for themselves. The creators realized this problem and decided to nerf the gun, it was made easily available to all players for a period of time and then in the next update its damage stats were reduced. Soon players realized that these changes had happened and the quest for the next overpowered weapon began." (Ishaan)

"Overpowering" is the opposite of nerfing, and participants understand it is an act by which the developer increases the impact of an in-game property. The participants feel that the reasons to overpower certain elements are the same, either as a way of restoring balance or at times overpowering a corresponding class to counter an existing overpowered class. The participants found the use of overpowering a better solution than nerfing to encourage/motivate the player base to use the properties in game.

"There are several ways to play *DoTA 2*, being a Massively Online Battle Arena (MOBA) it is often a mix of individual strategies that

attempt to bring out the best elements of each team-player. One of the reasons we were drawn to the game was the intricate play-style and the ever-evolving gameplay and strategies. It is always fun to encounter new strategies and then build ways/plans to counter them. However, in the last few months the series of updates have begun to favor the *pushing* strategy. It has now become a strategy that is extremely difficult to counter as the game systems support people who successfully master it.

The game encourages people to quickly take down an enemy tower[19] by hook or crook as once the tower is down the game *spawns* a series of *mega-creeps* (NPC characters) on behalf of the person who destroyed the tower. These creatures are much stronger than the average creeps and make fighting-back extremely difficult for the other side. This change in the dynamics has caused all players to resort to a pushing strategy. The games have become monotonous, predictable and seem like a *rat-race*. We seem to have lost our beloved game in the process." (Vishal while playing with Ronik,)

d. Introducing newer problems?

Though the availability to remotely update the game code seems beneficial to developers on the surface, players view updates to games as *double-edged swords*, always worrying what changes an update can bring. Updates have been known to fix a particular set of problems and in the process, break a few things, the next update is then rolled out to fix the things

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[19] *DoTA 2* is a game where players are expected to guard three defensive towers and an ancient base from their opponents while attempting to take down the opponents' tower and base in the process.

broken by the current update. The participants agreed that the cycle of updates is a vicious one and it is extremely difficult to make a perfect game where every interaction/engagement is flawless.

> "It is impossible to alter the code without breaking a few things, it always happens and then we as players have to deal with the damage. If we take EA Sports' *FIFA* franchise, it is a game where speed and pace play a major role to a point that we as players always try to pick the fastest footballers in the game for our squads, a trend the community calls *pace-abuse.* With every iteration, the developers promise a fix, in order to make slower more experienced footballers usable, it works for a couple of months but once the updates roll out and the game is patched, the pace-abuse is back." (Ishaan)

Data from the study indicated that updates are also known to create newer hierarchies in-game as changes in the game environment empower a portion of the game-community and in the process, weaken the rest. Players of large MOBAs and MMORPGs are known to spend considerable time reacquainting themselves to the new rules and mechanics post-update.

> "The game world in MOBAs is always prone to change and modification, in *Clash Royale* the game always launches newer cards to play with in regular-intervals. The newer cards that arrive have their own set of strengths and weaknesses, we as players must carefully examine each of them and then decide if they are worth leveling-up. Adding a new card at times can ruin a deck's balance, but not learning to use the new cards also means there are newer ways to

beat our current deck. The need to keep playing and practicing is

essential." (Prashant)

Downloadable Content:

a. Immanent Commodities

Downloadable Content (DLC) can be simply understood as software packages that are add-ons to the video game a player purchases. These packages can add new features, content and characters to existing games and in the process, extend the game-cycle. Tyni and Sotamaa view DLCs as the key step that transforms video games from an entertainment "product" to a "service" (Tyni & Sotamaa, 2011). These additional content packages are often purchased by players and the developers view them as not only additional sources of revenue but also a process to foster a long-term service relationship (Tyni & Sotamaa, 2011).

Lizardi on the other hand, views DLC content as a means by which video game companies are maximizing on the consumer-surplus amongst the player base (Lizardi, 2012; Brynjolfsson et al 2003). The ability to receive additional revenue from players long after a game's sale is indicative of the developers' desire to monetize the success of the title and at the same time refresh the gaming landscape in order to keep the player base interested. Lizardi believes that through DLC content players are being subjected to a perpetual cycle of commodification (Lizardi, 2012 p. 3).

DLCs can be best understood as "immanent commodities" (Lizardi, 2012 p.5; Mosco, 2009 p.141) where a commodity is created within another commodity. The buying of coins in-game using real money is an example of acquiring an immanent commodity. The value of the

acquired intangible coins is limited to the game in which they can be used and thus, they have value only when the game is purchased and played.

Participants of the study inform that the player community has mixed reactions to the DLC phenomenon; the concept of playing their favorite games for an extended period of time is always welcome but the need to pay a large amount of money is a divisive subject to discuss.

> "DLCs are definitely going to be a part of all our gaming experiences from now on, they are a means to make money and I don't see any reason why a developer doesn't want more of that. The problem arises when the most basic things a game provides now, suddenly need to be bought. A DLC must add to the game, not make it playable." (Ram,)

The participants also realize that sometimes DLC content only makes existing games better and are worth the investment. The need for players to identify the value for money deals is essential.

> "For me playing Uncharted is priceless, I always loved Nathan Drake and all the other characters. When the last game in the series came to an end I was saddened by the prospect of never going on a newer adventure as Nathan. Then the DLC pack arrived, it allowed me to go on another mini-adventure. Yes, it was not as exciting as the main game but it was worth the money." (Bhargav)

However, not all participants were enamored by DLCs, some of them view the original content as "canon" and the DLCs as add-ons or spin offs. They are not considered to be a part of the main adventure and thus are not worth the time and effort.

> "Finishing Witcher 3 was an emotional experience for me, I had put in close to a hundred hours into the game and had explored the game-world the best I could. It was an amazing experience, everything from the story to the gameplay. But at the end of it I was done with it. I had completed a perfect adventure and wanted it to remain that way. So, I simply skipped playing the DLCs. Doesn't mean I didn't like the game enough, I absolutely loved it but the main campaign was enough."
> (Chaitanya)

b. Need for balance

All participants of the study unanimously agreed the need for balance in DLC content and the content a game ships with. The view DLC content as essentially in-app purchases (IAP) garbed in a different form, catering to a different platform. The need for game developers on the mobile platform to remain aggressive by pushing for micro-transactions and incentivizing spenders is justifiable as their games are part of the freemium economy. The participants feel that AAA developers on the other hand are merely maximizing their revenues and banking on their players' consumer surplus. The success of the format depends on the developers' abilities to offer additional value to a player who has already a purchased a successful game. The responses from the study strongly suggest, that the need for developers to maintain their credibility in the process is extremely important as a very fine line separates content developers from exploiters.

> "The game *Evolve* was great example of DLC's ruining a game. The game had an innovative concept and promising gameplay but buying the game did not mean we could start playing it. It was ridiculous as

players needed to shell out close to twice the money to buy key DLCs in order to begin playing. What were the developers thinking? No game is worth extra investment if I can't play it at all. How is a game like that different from ransomware?" (Ishaan)

The participants emphasize that, the larger player community is very unforgiving when developers make promises and fail to keep them. The ensuing vitriol has at times destroyed gaming franchises and the service relationship that developers seeks to establish in the first place.

"Earlier developers were honest people who sought to provide their players with the best game they could make, today the best elements need to be paid for in the terms of additional cost. If we were to buy a burger the key ingredients that are expected to come with it are the bread, the filling, the sauces and the ketchup. You can be expected to pay more for extra cheese or mayonnaise or a specific dip that doesn't come with the burger and I am fine paying for it. The games today however are only the bread, you need to pay extra for everything else. Aren't we as players being taken advantage of?" (Ram, Personal Interview at a *KFC*, 20/08/2015)

Early Access:

Early Access is a facility launched by the publisher *Electronic Arts* for players on Microsoft's Xbox One consoles. It is a system that allows players to pay a periodic fee in exchange for early access to the stable of EA's games. The Xbox users from the participant pool observe that players with early access can play games almost a whole week earlier than the

worldwide release. They feel that the reason a service like EA's early access exists is because players value the need to be first to play the latest games. Juul (2009) and Kerr (2006) view playing the latest games a key attribute in defining the "hardcore" element in gamers, this move is indicative that EA and other developers have realized that this attribute can also be monetized as players are willing to pay more. Sections of the participant pool view this trend as the culmination of DLCs and In App purchases.

> "If a day one update is absolutely necessary for all games today then what happens to players who are paying to play the game prior to launch? They are definitely not going to get the day one update, are they paying more to play incomplete games? Secondly, if the day one update is rolled out to them prior to launch; then is EA willing to hurt the rest of the player base by telling them that their money isn't good enough to get them their favorite games at the earliest? Early Access will hurt the gaming industry significantly." (Ishaan)

Other participant strongly believe that the developers are getting players to pay and test early versions of the game instead of it being the other way around.

> "Early access is the same as beta testing, normally games are released to a limited audience early in order to test the game and the developers use the information from these games to further improve the final product. The same is happening with people who pay to get the game prior to launch, they are paying to test unreleased software.

We as players must realize that early-access is a huge waste of money." (Ram)

Incomplete games and Broken Experiences

Owing to variety of reasons video games launch with a variety of problems into the market. For the developer, it is a series of problems that can be rectified by issuing updates and patches for the player however it is a commodity that doesn't function as advertised. The participants' responses unmask an industry-wide trend that has emerged since the deep integration of the internet and web-based services into video game code. Players have begun to receiver incomplete products on days of launch and the now ever-present day one update has not always been successful in fixing all the problems.

In the last couple of years' games like Ubisoft's *Assassins Creed Unity*, Microsoft's *Halo: Master Chief Collection*, and Rocksteady's *Batman: Arkham Knight* have caused players a lot of grief as not only have they been unable to play the games they paid for, but speedy solutions to problems have not been possible. Cloud based digital markets like *Steam* had begun to issue refunds to players of *Arkham Knight* as the industry at large grapples with these problems.

> "I really don't know what Ubisoft was thinking with *Assassins Creed Unity*, it was the first game they launched for the next-gen consoles and it was filled with problems. The game hung, crashed and stuttered entirely. It was one of the worst games I ever played. It had a great story and plot but the execution was terrible. The developers issued updates after updates but nothing helped. In the end, there was a final update the same size as the whole game (40 Gigabytes!) and it still

didn't make the game playable. The whole exercise was a waste of money and internet bandwidth." (Chaitanya)

"I am an ardent fan of Halo and some of my most memorable gaming experiences revolve around the game. I chose to buy the Xbox One over the PS4 only because I could play Halo. The first game I bought with the console was the *Master Chief Collection*, a digital remaster of all the older Halo games. I plugged in the disc and tried to play only to realize that the multiplayer servers for the games wouldn't work. I felt cheated, the problem was not resolved for over a year as my Xbox sat at home collecting dust. Even today the match making elements of the multiplayer mode are suspect. I cannot wait forever, right?" (Bodavala),

If we are to put Chaitanya and Bodavala's observations in perspective then it is important to understand that, while players maybe willing to understand small problems at the time of launch; it is difficult to explain to them how unplayable games can be sold without adequate testing. One of the most awaited games of 2016 *No Man's Sky* was a fan favorite of the audiences at E3 2014 and E3 2015, the hype and publicity surrounding the game was immense as players wished to immerse themselves in the promise of unlimited space travel. A few weeks after launch the player base realized that the sprawling universe of the game had very little to offer in terms of play. The game developers came under immense amounts of criticism and were forced to accept that the game wasn't ready at the time of launch (despite being delayed twice prior to launch), a subsequent founders patch was released six

months after launch as the developers stated that it was the first of many updates to fix the game.

In an industry where players often decide to purchase their commodities on launch day and where large studios embargo reviews and in-game content prior to launch, it is a difficult scenario. Players hope to play the latest and greatest but can in no way be sure that the games are in a working condition. The integration of internet and the availability to update games have not done much to alleviate that fear. To put things in perspective if a car was launched that refused to start, it would never be on sale; it is time game developers are treated in the same way.

Cheats and Hacks: Breaking Rules in Ludic Spaces

This sub-section deals with the use of cheat codes and hacks in order to manipulate their experiences in the game-space. By specifically analyzing the various motivations that cause players to cheat in ludic spaces and examining their justifications, the study provides a context for what overcoming challenges means to players.

Cheats

Consalvo traces the earliest hidden code in video games to the 1978 Atari 2600 title *Adventure*, a game, in which one needed to find a single gray pixel from a wall painted in an identical color to access a secret room that displayed the name of its creator Warren Robinett (Consalvo, 2009a p.1). Since then, hidden codes and lesser-known "Easter-eggs" have become an integral part of video games.

Juul understands games as rule systems and it is essential to view games as sites where a player attempts to overcome the challenges/obstacles in ingenious ways while all the time

conforming with the rules. As Juul succinctly puts it "slaying a dragon in a game is a fictional act but following real rules to do so is what makes the situation *half-real*" (Juul, 2005 p.1). cheats and Easter-eggs are lines of code that enable players to break these very rules, thereby imbuing them with attributes/abilities that were not indented to be part of the original game.

History of cheat-codes

The earliest cheat-codes were generally found and shared by players on forums such as *Usenet* and were in the form of sequences of buttons and directional keys that were to be keyed-in just the right way on the controllers to unlock. Modes such as the infamous *God* mode (making the player indestructible thereby, eliminating the lose element of the win-lose binary) and a gamut of others could be unlocked as the original game developers built these codes to aid them during the game development phase. These can be likened to left-over 'scaffolds' that were used by the original developers and cannot be removed post-development, as the developers view the game's final *gold-master* code as a house of cards delicately in balance and tampering with the final working code could bring it all tumbling down. In order to prevent unforeseen glitches and complications the codes are left in the game carefully hidden and expected never to be found (Graddock, 2016). For the gamer looking to beat the game, therefore, finding these hidden embedded codes offers something akin to a hidden key:

> "Eidos Interactive's *Commandos* (1998) was an extremely difficult
> stealth/strategy game, one that I could not beat; no matter how hard
> I tried. It was one of the most difficult games I ever played. The desire
> to progress in the story was so high, that when an elder cousin told
> me to key in *gonzoopera*, I immediately did it. It was a master code i.e.

a code that unlocked a variety of other codes ranging from *God* mode

to infinite ammunition." (Chaitanya)

The use of cheat-codes has always been a source of contentious debate among players (Consalvo, 2009a). The explorers (Bartle, 1996; Yee 2005) as a player category habitually spend hours in game-worlds exploring their various intricacies and view the finding and successful execution of cheat-codes, Easter-eggs and game anomalies as both the spoils-of-war as well as a means to gain credibility and acceptance in the larger gaming community. The achievers and killers (Bartle, 1996) on the other hand use them to quickly level-up to access the game's final content or prey on other players who are unaware of the codes.

Codes and Trainers

Trainers, unlike cheat-codes are not remnant pieces of developer codes but are specific programs written by *cracker* groups or other players who possess a high level of programming know-how. Trainers generally work as separately executable files that must be run before a game is started or are integrated in the start-scenes of games. These programs specifically alter the game's registry values[20] to bend the ludic rules and provide the player with a variety of benefits. Trainers unlike cheats are not designed for a single specific in-game purpose and can be tailor-made to suit a variety of players' needs.

"I remember using a trainer for the first time, it was for *Need for Speed*

Most Wanted. A racing game where the protagonist loses his BMW at

the beginning of the game and has to beat a number of racers to

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[20] A registry value is a repository of information about programs. In the case of games, it controls numeric data like the amount of in-game currency, items equipped, player level etc. Tampering with these values could give the player infinite cash, health or ammunition.

acquire it back. The game was a lot of fun to play, but you needed to earn a lot of cash and bounty to progress in the game. I remember using a *+7* trainer which not only allowed me to have infinite cash and bounty but also allowed me to have things like an unlimited nitrous boost. But, the best thing about the trainer was that it allowed me to use that *very* BMW throughout the game, right from the beginning of the game. A straightaway access to end-game content, who wouldn't want that?" (Naveen)

The participants of the study argue that unlike cheat-codes, the use and creation of trainers is a far more customized and deliberate act that is indicative of the blurring boundaries between the video-game developer and the player community. The creation of these programs indicates the gaming community's ability to reverse-engineer the game-code and edit the game's memory system. The video game then becomes a site of conflict, where the game developers expect it to be played in a certain way but the players play the way they desire. These acts often lead to a regular to-and-fro between the two communities as each attempts to wrest control of the game from the other.

Cheaters vs Spoilsports

Consalvo (2009b) makes a distinction between cheaters and spoil-sports and analyses cheaters as players who were most concerned with the protection of game-rules. Cheaters gain currency in game-worlds by bending rules and their efforts only bear fruit when all the other players of the game strictly adhere to the rules. It is only when the rules are the same for everyone but the cheaters, can the cheaters showcase their *playing prowess*.

Spoil-sports in contrast aren't concerned with being better or winning games but are more with ruining others' acts of play (Consalvo, 2009b). They do not merely attempt to bend ludic-rules but attempt to wreck ludic systems for everyone involved. The simplest image of a spoil-sport is of a child annoyed with a game of Chess who simply upturns the board when the game is in progress, leaving the game unplayable. In a world filled with multiplayer games coming across spoil-sports is common. They can range from a team-mate in a Massively Online Battle Arena (MOBA) who doesn't do anything right, to an opponent who just switches off the game just before he/she is about to lose, an act called a "rage-quit" i.e. quitting the game in a fit of rage.

> "Playing Multiplayer games, is absolutely amazing because you face a high level of unpredictability and are expected to decipher and counter a vast number of strategies. However, you also encounter a lot of people who just can't accept defeat. We, humans are sore losers. While playing FIFA's Ultimate Team (FUT) you run into players who just power off their console in the 89th minute just before the whistle blows. On the *PS4* this leads to a quit in the game which causes not a reset but shows the game as a defeat in my account. In a game mode like FUT one is rewarded for the number of victories one has and acts like these are extremely unsporting." (Ishaan)

Perspectives of Cheating in Games

This section delves into the debate of using cheats and trainers in video-games and looks at the four unique perspectives put forward by the participants with regards to their use. The first and most common perspective held by the participants of study was that there are

specific games where using cheat-codes increases the fun element and makes the resultant gaming experience more engaging.

> "I generally try and avoid the use of cheat-codes in serious-games. Games like First Person Shooters (FPS), Real Time Strategy (RTS), Role Playing Games (RPG) are ones where I tend to just play and have fun. The challenges in these games are progressive in nature and you often don't need cheats at all. But, then there are games like the *Grand Theft Auto* series which have been designed precisely for cheat-codes to be used. There is something about those franchises, the casual nature of the game and the world's design indicates that it is a world where anything can happen and everything is permitted. I have friends who strongly believe that *GTA cannot* and *should not* be played without cheat-codes." (Chaitanya,)

Conversely, there were other participants who strictly believed in the need to abide by the rules and follow them to the letter as they make the challenge element of the game worthwhile.

> "I remember downloading an APK file of *Asphalt 7* that was cracked in a way that all cars in it were unlocked. The main challenge of playing a game like Asphalt is to win races and unlock new cars. However, in this cracked version all the games were unlocked right from the start and I had the best cars at my disposal. It was a lot of fun at the start as I experimented with a slew of cars. But, the enjoyment was short-lived as there was hardly any challenge. Games are not fun but merely

mechanical tasks if all you do is win. The races seemed like an endless

formality filled grind and I soon deleted the game." (Prashant)

The participants' third viewpoint, is a more nuanced one, holding that cheat-codes in games can be permitted as long as the game system is equipped to restore balance when they are used, thus ensuring that the game remains fair and challenging.

"I realized the existence of cheat-codes long after I finished games

whose codes I found. I remember I finished *Road Rash* and much later

a friend of mine showed me the infamous nitrous cheat. It just didn't

seem worth it. I was left wondering, why did we need cheats? Weren't

players good enough? Then a few months later, I was playing *Age of*

Empires against a friend on a LAN connection and he used the cheat

code "BIGBERTHA" to unleash nuclear powered siege units in a Pre-

Roman era. I just didn't know what to do, I used a couple of Priests

against them, in-game priests have a unique ability to cause units on

the field to switch allegiances. Soon, all the BIGBERTHAs were in my

control. It was absolutely hilarious." (Bodavala)

In the final perspective, players feel they are justified using cheats and other shortcuts if the opponents they are facing against are doing the same. They view the use of cheats in such situations as just a way to level the playing field.

"I am very concerned about being labeled a cheater, I never want to

be called one and always strive to win my games fair and square.

However, I am very tempted to break the rules but only to teach my

opponents a lesson when they cheat. I want them to know that even I

am aware of their existence and games must be decided only on the merit and quality of play. I expect my fellow competitors to be hard-working, honest and loyal to the idea of fair-play." (Prashant).

Hacks

Hacks like trainers, are also specific programs that have been coded to alter the ludic space, although in a more permanent way. The alterations can be done in a variety of ways ranging from the way the game responds to player-action to entire modifications in game-worlds. However, hacks should not be confused with the gaming community's enthusiastic practice of building "mods." Hacks are not just aesthetic modifications but are manipulations of the inherent game code to give the user an unfair advantage over his/her counterparts.

The main distinction between hacks and cheats is in their creation and purpose of use. Cheats are often stumbled upon and discussed by the gaming community; as mentioned earlier, they are remnants of developer code and simply unlock conditions present in the underlying code. Hacks on the other hand are a further evolution of trainers and are specifically created to tamper with rules of the game on a very native level.

> "I hate coming across a player who uses a hack in a multiplayer game. It is absolutely difficult to identify them, I am a veteran of shooter games such as *Halo, Call of Duty* and *Counterstrike*, games like these are all about taking a perfect shot at the precise moment. There are hacks called "auto-aims" which when activated ensure every shot *is* the perfect shot. Being on the other side of it is baffling, you wonder how bad can you be or how good the opponent is. No matter what strategy you employ; one bullet and you're dead. The worst thing is,

that you are way too frustrated with yourself to identify the hack

being used against you." (Ishaan, Personal interview)

Participants in the study also observed the existence of hackers in MMORPGs and their use of "Macros." Macros are the abilities that a game allows a player to bind in a particular order. In MMO games generally about 3-4 actions can be triggered in a particular order by the player and can be mapped to a single key on the keyboard. This convenient feature can however be hacked and the bot/programs can be created that can trigger a slew of actions leading to a hyper level-up of players when they just key in a hacked macro.

"In classic MMORPGs, it is all about the grind, the constant repetition of mundane tasks and exploration of new avenues in the game. As you level up you *farm* in-game resources and slowly acquire newer abilities and equipment. The joy in such games is the anticipation of what comes ahead and what more needs to be done. The hard work in leveling up and becoming formidable is a constant goal, we all work towards. But when illegal macros are used, all this effort is cut down to a programming task. The entire experience is lost. When hackers hack, we are definitely being cheated against and all our efforts are trivialized." (Kannan)

Hackers worse than Cheaters?

This is an important question to grapple with at this juncture. The term cheating evinced a variety of responses from the participants as they attempted to justify how their use (randomly, occasional -to-frequent) use of cheat-codes, shortcuts and other Easter eggs in games cannot be *termed* cheating. The participants revealed that players as a community

seem to have a strong code of conduct amongst themselves as to when one can cheat and when they cannot.

> "If we were never meant to use cheat-codes, why on earth did they leave them in the game in the first place? They are there because a developer expects the player-base to use those codes to the fullest. I used cheats in *Crysis* not the one about infinite health and *god* mode but definitely the one that allowed me to carry any gun I desire. In a futuristic shooter game like *Crysis* I would like to carry each and every one of those guns not be restricted to just two. Carrying extra guns is harming no one, infinite ammo is hurting no-one either. Using cheats is ok as long as you can still experience the challenge." (Kartik)

The players also had a strong opinion that using cheats in single player campaigns (SPCs) is allowed as the players are cheating "no-one in particular" and the computer and its AI don't really have "anything to lose." This opinion of the participants is theoretically problematic; if video games are to be understood as a post-modern medium (Lister, 2003) and as examples for harmonic HCI platforms (Haraway, 1990; Nichols, 1988), it is crucial that players view the Computer and NPCs (Non-Playing Characters) as equal and worthy opponents by anthropomorphizing the inbuilt AI systems as opponents. This failure in anthropomorphizing challenges the general definitions of Agon based games (Caillois 1958/2001) where the game ceases to remain a competition and a challenge thus not merely questioning the medium's ability to simulate a worthy opponent but corrupting the very act of play. However, this doesn't seem to be the case all the time as not all players imbue the Computer and NPCs with attributes that make them opponents "worthy" of fair play.

"What players do in SPCs is between them and their conscience, people with a strong sense of honor and fairness will not cheat no matter who the opponent is. However, cheating in SPCs is not a serious concern. The problem arises when Multiplayer games are hacked, players fail to realize that by cheating a win they are ruining other people's time and efforts. Cheating in any form in multiplayer games cannot be allowed. We are moving to an era of e-sports where video games are going to be treated on par with the Olympics. If players can't be fair, then stringent rules must be put in place." (Ram, Diary Entry, undated).

The observations made here are in line with the findings/analysis of both Consalvo (2009) and Kimppa and Bissett (Kimppa, Bissett, 2005). Kimppa and Bissett paraphrase Thomas Powers (Powers, 2003) to offer an observation similar to Sherry Turkle's notions from Multi user Dungeons (MUDs) when looks at a MUD scenario where in a group one of the users, after wresting control of a female player's character, went on to rape that character amidst the group as the horrified owner of the character watched helplessly. Turkle uses this incident to understand the cause of the user's discomfort when the character is merely virtual and thus challenges the real virtual binary and points to the blurring of boundaries between the two worlds. (Turkle, 1995).

> *Although it is clear enough that the relationship between players is not one-to-one with the person in question, this, however, does not mean that the wrongs made in the virtual would not have consequences in the real world for the non-virtual player. The acts done in real world cause the acts which happen in the virtual environment and those again affect the people in the real world.* (Kimppa, Bissett, 2005 p.4)

It is important for the field of game-studies to not only recognize the amount of effort and time people put into video games but also examine the anguish players feel when their efforts fail to earn suitable rewards. Cheat-codes though being in an ethical gray area do not cause physical and mental discomfort to fellow players. The same cannot be said in the case of hacks and hackers as they trivialize and undermine the hard work of their opponents and their playing prowess by breaking the rules that govern the magic circle (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). When the rules aren't the same during play then the "magic" ceases to exist. On careful analysis, one can still view cheats as a term shrouded in the element of discovery and exploration often leaving a player in awe of the outcome. Cheats can introduce new fun elements to games and can cause players to be engaged with the game for a longer period of time but hacks in contrast are strong disruptions. Disruptions, that can break the very foundations of gameplay, reducing play sessions to what Ishaan calls bouts of frustration.

Cracks

The final sub-section examines the use of cracked/pirated games by players in India; against a backdrop of an increasingly digital nation with an unwillingness to pay coupled with cost of gaming hardware piracy of games is rampant. The study causes the participants to reflect on the various ways they procure their games, the choices they make and their understanding of piracy. The study also causes players (both players of cracked games and authentic ones) to reflect on the industry's implementation of DRM and anti-tamper technology and the shift in their ludic lives because of it.

Understanding Cracks

Cracks, derived from the "crackers" community are software manipulations, workarounds, exploits and ingenious ways that allow for users to run proprietary software, services and play games for which they do not own the licenses. The term *cracking* has always had a negative connotation in the programming world and was etymologically understood as the counter-view to the more ethical, entrepreneurial term *hacking*.

However, somewhere along the line; the attributes have merged in mainstream understanding, with key characteristics of both the classes of programmers subsumed under the umbrella term *hacking*, as hackers today are viewed almost like terrorists as the world fears their disruptive capabilities in a rapidly interconnecting world. In the post-Wikileaks era, data activists like Assange, Snowden and Schwartz or the group *Anonymous* are attempting to reconfigure popular (mis)conceptions and restyle themselves as radical forces that seek to restore democracy and challenge monopolistic institutions in the increasingly capitalist global economy.

Players interviewed in this study broadly classify cracks into three broad kinds: firstly, the ones that manipulate the serial keys of software in order to unlock them; secondly, the ones that make changes in the file system, registry settings; and thirdly those who make available the complete packages pre-cracked and all the user must do is click on an icon, wait for the installation and simply use the software.

> "Keygens, Key files were the earliest form of cracks. Sometimes, when
> we downloaded a game we got a text file with it that had a key or a
> bunch of keys that we needed to enter at the time of installation we

needed to keep trying till one worked or else find more keys. This problem was solved with keygen software, a software that would randomly generate keys every time we asked it to. Cracking the game was as simple was finding the right key to unlock it" (Chaitanya)

Chaitanya's description of the keygen software indicates that crackers as a community have been well versed with the ability to reverse-engineer software and find ways to circumvent the protection/ anti-tamper systems in place. The functioning of the keygen to generate new keys indicates the abilities of the community to identify and replicate the algorithm that the developers used to make new keys.

"Keys and Keygens were well and good but soon we had games that would install but wouldn't run if there was no optical disc in the drive. If you think about it, it was a simple way; no disc meant no game but soon we had cracks, workarounds that allowed for virtual drives and virtual disc images. Software like *Alcohol 120%*, *Daemon Tools, Magic ISO* created virtual drives on which the game file could be mounted and we could play the games without the discs. However, this changed as well and the system simplified with the *no-cd* crack one needed to simply replace the .exe file with one that made the PC believe there was always a disc in the drive." (Ram)

Most participants agreed that the *no-cd* crack was the most popular manifestation of cracking methods and felt it was the simplest way to use cracks as all one had to do was to replace the file in the installation directory and the game would be ready to play. The new executable file altered values in the file registry in an opaque manner in the process making

their systems vulnerable to attacks but the players were unaware and unconcerned with any of the changes as long as they had a game that ran smoothly.

> "Before the *no-cd* crack there were a lot of steps one needed to follow to get the game up and running, we needed to tamper with a lot of files and often we had to go into configuration settings and make changes that were often a hit and miss. Games or software came with complex instructions list that needed to be followed very carefully and there was no room for error as the entire file system would corrupt and you would have to begin all over again. *FIFA 08* was one such game I bought a pirated CD from a hawker and despite reading the instructions I could make no sense of them or get the game running. It was one of the first games that made me alter the system's registry files." (Naveen)

Some participants were keen to point out that prior to the no-cd crack, the system was often complicated as the instructions were often abstruse and convoluted often causing players large amounts of frustration. At times like these players turned to those in the community who were cracking experts i.e. players who played a large number of crack games and thus were aware of most methods.

> "There were always one or two games that needed a large number of steps to be followed; the file had to be setup in a particular directory, the internet needed to be deactivated at a particular stage and then reactivated at another. The time and date settings needed to be changed and so on and so forth. For some games, we needed help,

someone to cross-check the instructions with as they could often be interpreted in different ways. The method was largely a trial and error one and we needed to keep trying till all things just clicked and the game worked. Sometimes, the game would start and there would be no sound, sometimes it wouldn't start in full-screen or sometimes it would launch and we would be left staring at a black screen. It was always a suspense filled activity." (Kartik)

The data from the interviews suggests that the cracking community in India has become very organized and a lot of games are now available online in a variety of sizes and arrive pre-cracked. Players today need to merely just extract the files from the archive and begin playing. Most of the participants are aware of popular cracking groups like *Reloaded, 3DM, Skidrow, CPY, RG Mechanics* and *Fitgirl*. With the proliferation of social networking platforms and high-speed internet, players follow the crackers' developments and are ready to download the latest games the moment they are cracked.

"Internet bandwidth is the most valuable resource most of the games we want are generally cracked on day one the challenge is to decide if we want the complete cracked version which is generally a large download or to wait it out for a more compressed file size if you have other games to download. The best thing is the ability to choose as the longer you wait to download the game the more refined is the game as crackers also upload update files, DLC content and patches, fixes to games making things incredibly easier. I like to download compressed games with easy installers from Fitgirl or RG Mechanics as they come generally a week after and are play-ready." (Chaitanya)

Chaitanya's observation about internet bandwidth being the most valuable resource is important as most players from the study who play cracked games acknowledged the ease in availability of new games to play but lamented the shortage of time and the inability to do justice to their bandwidth limits as they ended up downloading games they didn't enjoy. A stark contrast to players who purchased authentic games and were thus restricted to a fewer number of games and based their choices on heavy research and followed their potential games closely throughout the development cycle. The easy availability of game titles when cracked has caused several players in the participant group to become collectors of games. The participants acknowledged the credibility they received from the larger gaming community when they could offer a game that the others didn't have.

> "There are times in a year when there are too many new and great games that we need to play. At times like that we are spoilt for choice generally the western festive period of Christmas and New Year is targeted by the developers as games are rapidly launched since October. There is generally an *Assassins Creed,* a *Call of Duty, Battlefield, Farcry,* and some surprising new games at that time. We are in a hurry then as we must quickly play through and move on to the next one constantly worrying if we are missing out on better games." (Chaitanya)

The constant worry of missing out on better games doesn't extend to people who purchase their games as they are in a constant search for value and often buy their games after they have been heavily reviewed and when they are offered at a discount. The cracked economy has reinforced the stereotype of the hardcore gamer as one who plays the latest and greatest

of games. Despite their closed structure and limited operating systems console systems aren't free of cracks either as most console players in the study were aware of *modding* systems that allowed them to play cheaper, pirated game discs on their consoles.

Spoilt for choice

Reflections from Participant Observation:

It is a sunny afternoon as I walk into a dingy little shop (entrance to the right) in the bank street of Koti, an old marketplace in Hyderabad, with one of my participants (Ravi) who wishes to buy 'new' games for his Xbox 360. The shop consists of a single counter facing several racks rising to the ceiling stacked with games packed in cheap polythene covers. On the left, there are more racks laden with CRT televisions and last-gen consoles (PS3 and Xbox360). We are greeted by a boy who asks the names of the games we wish to purchase and confirms whether our console's been modded. Ravi looks at me inquiringly and then reels off a number of titles he wishes to play. I walk around looking at titles randomly and point out a few that I think he should try. Each game is priced at 60 INR (approx. USD 1) and a AAA title that usually costs 60 times as much suddenly seems infinitely more affordable. We are in a place where every game one wishes to play can be purchased for a mere fraction of the original cost. We pick up a bunch of discs (about 15-20 games) and walk out of the shop.

Once at Ravi's place, he acquaints me with his ritual of buying modded games in which the first step is to plug in all the new discs one by one and check the games that are working. Most of them run flawlessly while a few need certain adjustments. Some discs evoke a geo

lock error from the console; these he says are unplayable, but the sheer number of new games in his library is mindboggling. He then calls the shop and informs them of the games that aren't working and schedules a time when he will come and pick up other games in exchange. At the end of the exercise I see games lying in front of me which I played over a five-year period, games launched since 2010. The pile included games that players in my study had waited on for years while they were in development and here they were, fully finished and ready to play, at Ravi's disposal. The lack of emotional connect with those games was visible as Ravi quite simply had picked the best games in the last five years almost as if picking them off a bestsellers list.

> "Buying a console is an expensive act, the first thing my father told me when I purchased my console was that he would never buy or help me buy the games for it. I had to find a cheaper way to find new games. Modding a console voids its warranty but a console is also useless without a new game to play. It is a painful thing to mod a new console as there is no guarantee it will work, here is always a risk, but I had to do it; one of the most difficult decisions I ever made." (Naveen)

The experience of Ravi buying all those games remained with me and shaped the follow up questions I asked him in the ensuing interviews. The sheer number of games was significant and as a player it takes just as much time to finish a game five years after as on the day of launch. Ravi was always playing a game or two at all times often wondering when he would manage wading through the collection.

> "I have these huge number of games lying with me and there is no time
>
> to finish them. Some of them like *Skyrim: Elder Scrolls* and *Witcher 2,*
>
> are over 100 hours long! I am finding it incredibly difficult as the rest
>
> of the games are quite distracting, I am always worried if I am missing
>
> out on a better game while am spending time finishing this." (Ravi)

Players who engage in the cracked economy face the twin constraints of time and internet bandwidth. While internet bandwidth as a constraint is self-explanatory, time as a constraint however is a little difficult to explain. The participants point out that there are 2-3 AAA titles that launch every month and a player is expected to purchase and play one of them (generally the one he/she decides is the most "value") but the cracked economy allows for players to play all three games increasing availability of games. The
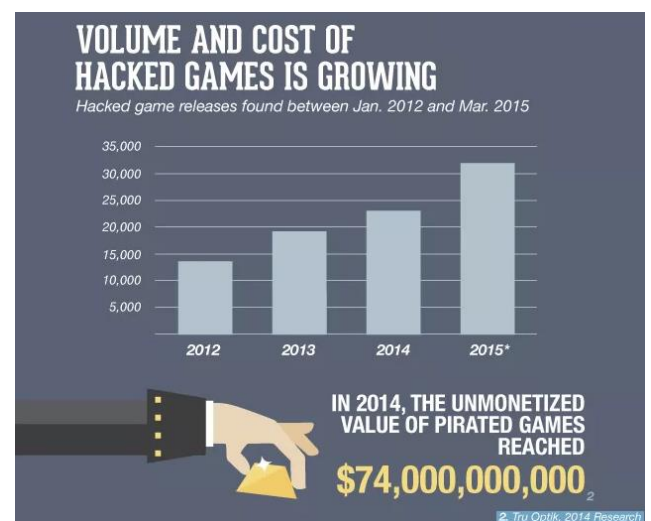
Figure 15: The loss in video game revenues according to Tru Optik's 2014 Research Report (Tru Optik, 2014)

time required to play the games remains the same and thus the players of cracked games have to rush their ludic experiences as they are unable to decide what games are the "most value."   Players of authentic games on the other hand seem to have an abundance of both but their major constraints are affordability and access. While the former fit into the gaming industry stereotype of the "hardcore" gamer they however do more damage to the industry in terms of lost revenues. The gaming industry till 2015 was constantly mired in piracy issues as close to half the population of gamers worldwide were playing cracked games (Arxan, 2015).

DRM Technology: The Price of *Denuvo*

The significant loss to the gaming industry led to the use of more aggressive anti-tamper, piracy hindering measures form the developers of games as they began to making cracking difficult for the crackers. The advent of digital piracy has played a massive role in the loss of revenue for media companies across platforms as most organized media industries have been hit severely (Frontier Economics, 2011). The movie, music and television industry have developed newer strategies to minimize this loss of revenue but the video game industry had failed to adapt as cracked games began to appear prior to launch dates itself. Participants for the study however are keen to point out that the launch of Austrian company *Denuvo's* proprietary anti tamper DRM technology seems to have put the brakes on the cracking community's speed of launching games.

Denuvo's DRM measures, which the company claims are in no way tamper proof, use the internet constantly to ensure the authenticity of the game's install and thus makes cracking of games difficult. The need for an always-on internet connection is also a strategy used by the current generation consoles (PS4 and Xbox One) as neither of them have yet been successfully modded since their launch in 2013. The cracking industry has found ways across Denuvo but the

Figure 16: Denuvo Gmbh the firm behind the control on piracy

DRM like the games has also been constantly updated by the company, forcing players to either wait for quite some time before the game is cracked or just buy the original game. Cracking groups like *3DM* have disbanded acknowledging that breaking the Denuvo code is extremely difficult and piracy of games is about to die (Papadopoulos, 2016).

> "Denuvo changed the way we approached games, most of the big studios like *EA*, *Ubisoft*, *Square Enix* and *Activision* began to use it and games began to vanish. I first noticed it with *FIFA 15* it was a yearly franchise I always looked forward to and suddenly it just vanished. I scrounged the internet for months hoping to find the date but it was just not cracked. It was finally cracked in May 2015 almost nine months after release. Can you believe it, 9 months?" (Chaitanya,)

Some participants also observed that the use of Denuvo meant that players began to look beyond AAA titles in their gaming and began considering freemium games or switching to multiplayer modes. The focus also shifted to games from indie developers as they could not afford the high cost of subscribing to the Denuvo service.

> "I switched to *DoTA 2* primarily because it was free and I didn't have to wait for it being cracked etc. multiplayer games will always be around and I now find them much more engaging. At the same time, I have also begun to look at small Indie games like *The Witness*, *Firewatch* and *Everybody's gone to the rapture.* These games are cracked easily and I also now have some variety in my games." (Ram)

However, even buyers of authentic games are peeved about the industry wide implementation of Denuvo DRM as they feel that the people who buy authentic games are the ones suffering. Participants who buy authentic games were quick to point out that in a developing country like India constant internet availability is not guaranteed and often they are unable to play games they have paid for, suffering for the acts of the pirates, who they believe are not going to buy the games anyway.

"The people who suffer the most because of Denuvo are the buyers, the use of the technology has driven up prices of games as developers recover the new cost (of subscribing to Denuvo's tech) from players. At the same time, they must realize that people used to the habit of playing for free are willing to wait till the eventual crack but it is we the people willing to pay who suffer in the interim. I really like developers of *Witcher 3* who ensured that their game was DRM free. It is ironic that the people most punished for piracy are the people with authentic goods as they must adhere to every norm by the book."

(Bodavala)

Unwillingness to Pay

While the advent of Denuvo forces players across the country to examine and reconfigure their gaming preferences and practices, it needs to be noted that most participants consumed their media products for free and were surprised to be asked about it. Proliferation of P2P, web based file transfer platforms were very high among the player base as they consumed a large amount of culturally, contextually diverse content ranging from Japanese Anime to Iranian films all made available through high speed internet.

"I hate it when people play cracked games, that is not how they are meant to be played. However, I also hate paying for games; free is just the way I like them." (Ishaan)

Ishaan's response is interesting when analyzed because he in the capacity of a video game reviewer has access to the games he desires to play and review, a luxury most players are not afforded with. However, the same Ishaan though critical of cracked games doesn't mind

downloading pirated movies, TV series and music from P2P platforms. Evidently, the participants do not view piracy as a moral crime nor do they situate it in a moral gray area. The desire to obtain entertainment content for free when coupled with the supply from the internet has created a media hungry public that views paying for good content as a problematic situation and for people like these the "freemium revolution" couldn't have happened at a better time.

<u>Overview of the Indian Gamescape</u>

By pitching the ever-customizable and modular in-design PC against the locked-down video game console the players were able to offer unique insights into various factors that determine their choices ranging from preferences of play, cost of acquisition, choices of input method (keyboard and mouse vs the controller), loyalty to game ecosystems, the role of friends and gaming networks and the commercial success of the platform in general. While watching the participants constantly grapple with a multitude of issues to arrive at a decision, their high levels of technological knowhow reinforced the narrowing of the gap between the producers and the consumers when they engage with post-modern media. Several scholars of new media talk about the blurring boundaries between the same and with gamers/players the gap seems ever so negligible as the player communities today develop mods, and a lot of original content from their in-game engagements.

One observation that emerged from the data was the general acceptance amongst the participants that purchasing a gaming console was a better financial investment for gaming as a practice in the long-term, the PC however was an easier purchase owing to its wider range of features as it could be used by the entire family. The players also indicated that the

modular nature of the PC required for players to be part of a constant upgrade cycle as hardware became redundant a lot faster, the console cycle on the other hand was found to be longer but the optimized experience in consoles left players wanting as they aged. The players were in a constant debate about the intended experience of the PC and the optimized one offered by the console while attempting to make decisions that suited their style of play, gaming preferences and their financial limitations in the constant search for what they called "value for money."

In the realm of mobile games, the data from the participants indicated that developers have begun to design video games for mobile by developing games that tap into the portable nature of the medium and tailoring repeated micro-sessions of engagement. By making larger marathon gaming sessions increasingly difficult players have been forced to adapt and evolve their approaches to games.

The analysis suggests that players actively seek games that reward their commitment, effort and loyalty to the game-world. In-game offerings such as log-in bonuses and rewards for repeated engagement incentivize their commitments to the game in the long-term. However, the largest issue of contention amongst players on the mobile platform is the need for balance amongst developers when they offer in-app purchases through micro-transactions. Players willing to put in considerable amounts of time, effort and thought have felt the presence of a glass ceiling that separates them from the high-spenders. While, developers need the "whales" to sustain their financial models they also need the players willing to toil and put in the effort as a counter to the big-spenders in order to keep things interesting. This sub-section also explores the increasingly relevant need to avoid the rudimentary

classification of mobile games and players into the casual games category and trivializing their ludic achievements in the process. Games such as *Clash of Clans*, *Clash Royale* and *Deck Heroes* are indicative of not only the high level of skill that players need to develop but also the huge amounts of time and effort required as players tailor their daily schedule by keeping in-mind the precise steps they must take at varying points throughout the day to keep their achievements relevant.

With the integration of the internet the video game has truly become a recursive site of power-control as the developers try and implement rules that cause players to play "their" game "the right" way. Similarly, players spend numerous hours strategizing, experimenting and trying to arrive at a meta-understanding of the game rules and principles in order to overcome the challenges they face in-game.

The data from the participant pool suggests that developer control initiatives such as "Nerfing" and "Overpowering" have become increasingly common in the industry as developers desperately try to restore balance to the game-world. Also, visible from the analysis is the existence of a clear communication channel between the players and the developers as the players feel that a lot of their opinions are now being considered and factored-in by developers when changes are implemented. The constant changes imply that games (multiplayer ones especially) are in a state of constant flux as players need to ensure that they are abreast of all the latest developments at all times, thus leading us to understand the modern-day gamer as one who needs to constantly be aware, updated and willing to alter his/her approach to the game at the drop of a hat in order to remain successful. The sub-section also deals with the flipside of internet's native integration in gaming platforms as the

participants pointed out to the increasingly data-heavy updates being pushed out as games often arrive "broken" and at times "unplayable" on launch day often causing severe amounts of frustration to the loyal pre-order game audiences and early adopters.

With regards to cheating in-games, the participant pool offers insights into the various kinds of cheats and hacks available and provides with a slew of reasons as to why players cheat in-game spaces but at the same time are offended and hurt when being called "cheaters." In single player campaigns when playing against the game's AI a lot of players acknowledged that using cheats was legal as they weren't hurting anyone. In the process indicating that at most times players weren't anthropomorphizing the AI and thus were rendering the magic-circle null in the process. In single player games the data also suggested that the explorers of game spaces took immense pride in finding new cheats and work-arounds and then sharing the information with the larger player-base in exchange for in-game adulation and credibility. Players were however conscious of their actions against fellow players as they were very critical of the use of hackers and cheaters in online game spaces.

Lastly, Cracks in video games are made possible by the incredibly high technological and programming knowledge that the global gaming player possesses as they are able to reverse engineer DRM and copyright protections in order to force entry. Data from the participants suggest that the global crackers community is extremely well organized as they have found ingenious ways to pirate content and at times games have been pirated even prior to the official launch.

The sub-section also discusses various reasons as to why players play cracked content and the various steps taken by the industry to curb the trend and the steps taken by crackers in

response. Analysis of the data also indicates a shift in the priorities of gamers who play pirated/cracked content as they are unconcerned with the financial cost of acquiring the game and at times have an unlimited supply to the latest and greatest games. They definitely meet the industry's expectations of being the ideal "hardcore gamer" (Kerr, 2006; Juul, 2009; Deshbandhu, 2016) but are doing so by constantly disregarding and trivializing the efforts of the developer community. For such gamers, the data suggests the most important factors to consider to play a game are the availability of time to play a game and the internet bandwidth to download it (as opposed to people who pay for the games they play as they take a lot of factors into consideration such as game reviews, genre preferences, pricing, platform compatibility etc.).

Chapter - 5

Friends, Communities and Networks: Gaming is social

<u>Introduction</u>

The term *play* has always had a social dimension, as discussed in Huizinga's seminal work *Homo Ludens.* Huizinga and Caillois view *play* as a key element in the evolution of civilization and also as an integral part of our lives today (Huizinga, 1955; Caillois, 2001). As I write this chapter on a slow, Monday afternoon in February I cannot help but think back to last night's football match (FC Barcelona vs Atlético Madrid), a match played by 22 players, watched by thousands at the site of play (the stadium) and viewed or otherwise followed live by millions across the globe as the action unfolds. A careful dissection of this single event unearths the most crucial elements of social play. The players, 22 in number involved in an act of *agon*, the viewers (fan bases of the two football clubs) aptly following the match akin to Geertz' Cock fights (Geertz, 2000), watching with intent, responding to every single action on the field and awaiting the final result.

Digital games today are no different, in an era of organized e-sports, professional gamers are elevated by their fans to the same pedestals as sport stars. In this context, it is important to acknowledge the role of multiplayer games in building such a sociality, and contributing to what one might refer to as the "social and professional turn" in video game studies. Castronova traces online play and MMORPGS to their offline imaginative worlds of *Dungeons and Dragons* and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (Castronova, 2003). Williams (2006) talks about the arrival of the first video game machines in social places like the *bars and nightclubs* places where the machines were as amenable to public use as the jukebox. Video game play

in such bars must have been as social as throwing darts. The earliest machines also had a leaderboard setup where players' highest scores were recorded and served as a challenge to anyone who played. There is a specific scene in CBS' popular sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* (Radnor et. al, 2011) where one of the lead characters Marshall Eriksen keeps going back to his college bar in order to maintain his score in *Skeeball* under his gamer tag *Big Fudge.* However, with the rise of personal computing and the collapse of the gaming arcade, video games entered the domain of households and the social dimension of video games shrunk considerably.

Figure 17: A leaderboard on early arcade machines

Within the home, playing video games became a familial activity as companies like *Nintendo* and *Sega* positioned their offerings to younger player bases. Nintendo's iconic *Gameboy Color* shipped in 1998 with an Infrared port that allowed its players to communicate with, and play against other players as long as the ports were perfectly aligned. Games like *Pokémon* had special features where players could evolve specific creatures only by trading them (Haunter to Gengar, Kadabra to Alkazam and Graveler to Golem) and receive mystery gifts in the process. However, the return to social on a larger scale returned with increasing use of the internet and its integration into gaming software.

The social in gaming today is about much more than bringing players together during play; it has significant online and offline elements which are essential to understanding contemporary gaming culture. A careful examination of these elements is necessary in order to gain insights into a player's complex thought and decision-making processes.

Offline Networks

This section of the chapter looks at the social elements of game play which are not part of the Internet and in that sense, have existed prior to online digital games. Data from the study has revealed that gamers are a closely knit social group where friends/relatives and their gaming choices and preferences play a key role in the decisions of players. Most participants in the study were introduced to video games by close friends and relatives a trend common in India and I strongly suspect in the rest of the world as well (Torchinsky, 2014). The players viewed these "mentors" (for the lack of a better word) as early role-models and their early (the players) video game related choices and decisions were both mimetic and emulative.

Watching Play

The video game has been described as the hallmark of post-modern media (Lister, 2003), a medium which cannot exist unless acted upon by the user. Acts of play are both immersive and engaging as players spend countless hours traversing simulated worlds and forging their ludic lore. It is therefore difficult to imagine a medium such as this being watched/passively consumed by viewers as others play. However, in India the mass adoption of personal computers and video game systems was slower and accelerated only at the turn of the millennium. Prior to this computers and consoles were rare and people playing video games even rarer.

The limited places where gaming platforms were available transformed into hubs of activity as interested people assembled to watch players in action.

> "One of my closest friends has a gaming console which is the only one
> in our area, every evening we all schedule our time of play and arrive

at his house to play a variety of games but mostly *FIFA*. Over time we all learnt and mastered playing *FIFA* together both as teammates and opponents. His house serves as a place for all our friends to meet. If one is ever lonely and needs some company all we have to do is to go there, and there's always a friend or two available." (Prashant, Personal Interview)

In the early nineties the cost of a computer or an early video game console in India was significant and most of the participants in the study acknowledged that their parents had to either secure financial loans or draw upon their savings in order to meet the requirements. A computer with a *Pentium III* processor and 32 Mb of ram cost a little over INR 60,000 (USD 1,200 with an exchange rate hovering just over 50 at that time) making the cost of acquisition a significant one. Thus, the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, home based gaming was restricted to relatively affluent sections of society, but this did not prevent young enthusiasts from finding ways to access this form of leisure. Apart from being at centers of player aggregation, potential players also visit friends/relatives in hope of gaining access to gaming platforms. These early sessions of engagement enable them to pick-up key skills like operating the systems and ensure that the players are prepared when they have their own devices.

"My father was posted in Nizamabad (a town 175 KM from Hyderabad) and I was in 2nd class (2001) when I visited my father's colleague's house and watched his son play DOS games on their computer. I was hooked and loved the idea of games like *Dave*, *Keen*, *Prince* and *Skyroads*. Once I was back in Hyderabad it was the same, I would visit my cousins in another locality every day to watch them play and hope for an opportunity to play. I also vividly remember

watching *Brian Lara Cricket* at a neighbor's place around this time. A lot of time video games meant watching play not playing them."

(Chaitanya)

As beginners negotiating game worlds is tough, as the ability to imbibe and internalize game rules and underlying mechanics develops with time and experience. Watching a lot of games as an activity is popular when the potential player lacks access to gaming platforms or games but it is also helps novice game players as they watch those with better skills in action. Watching in this case then becomes an act of learning and adjustment. Viewers gain the knowledge and also imbibe strategies and play-styles in the process.

> "I remember having *Crysis 3* form my Xbox 360 for a long time and I was stuck at this point in the game which I could not overcome no matter how hard I tried. Over time I just gave up and played a lot of other games, but I still could not clear that particular checkpoint in *Crysis 3*. I then had a friend over who admitted to loving the Crysis series, I placed my problem in front of him and watched him tackle the situation, he simply showed me a way of moving ahead which I hadn't thought of. I had played the game but had not learnt using the powers of the *nanosuit* and was playing it just like any other FPS game. The whole point of *Crysis* was the nanosuit and since I failed to make that observation, I failed to clear the level." (Ravi)

Watching to learn is a key element in the pro-gaming realms of today, as players watch others in action to learn new moves, strategies, understand differing play approaches, styles and at the same time staying abreast of newer developments in game-play.

Sharing Economy: The barter market

Data from this study indicate that sharing is one of the largest benefits of being part of a network of players. Sharing of gaming content, tips, strategies, game-time and resources has emerged as a frequent/common? practice. Focusing on content, the importance of sharing among fellow players has been acknowledged both by gaming hardware developers and the industry at large. In the West, game rental companies like *Blockbuster* and *Hastings* had built successful commercial models on renting of gaming and entertainment content. Services like these have failed to gain either traction or popularity in the niche Indian gaming market. The prevalence of *cracking culture* coupled with increasing internet bandwidth ensured that the Indian gaming markets had an adequate supply of new gaming titles as long as the players knew where to pirate cracked games.

> "The importance of friends with games was very important in the early days of my video game journey circa 2004. Internet then was very expensive and speeds were very slow as most internet connections were dial-up. The only way to find new games were to either buy them or find friends with whom to share. The rules for the sharing system were very strict, you could share a game with anyone as long as you had one to offer in return. Which meant for a beginner, things were tough as it was difficult to find games which were cracked." (Chaitanya)

> "The sharing and strict barter network existed even when I was starting out as a gamer, there were very few places in Hyderabad where one could find games. I bypassed the barter system as my

brother was also a gamer and we had cousins who played games too.

I tapped into all their networks for my gaming needs." (Kartik)

The rules/conventions of exchange in the informal barter system seem to be fairly rigid, as many participants spoke of their inability to convince and coax their friends into obtaining games when they had nothing new to offer. Consequently, the need to make new friends and tap into other networks became a necessity if one wished to maintain a steady flow of content.

> "When I got my first PC system I invited two of my friends to check it
> out and they came with a copy of *Sonic: The Mega Collection* not to give
> it to me but only to test my computer's performance. They installed
> the game, we played it for a while and then when they were leaving
> they made sure to uninstall the game despite my requests. It hurt me
> because they were close friends but the rules of the system seemed
> bigger than friendship." (Chaitanya)

With the increase in internet speeds and optical disks' plummeting of prices, piracy of games in India reached a higher level. Data from the study points to the easy availability of pirated video games from small shops and stalls much like the availability of pirated movies. The sprouting of such avenues altered the rules of the barter system as people with knowledge of these places were able to manipulate it.

> "I had a friend who used to have a yearly budget of buying up to 3
> original games in a year. I felt it was a waste of money as one could
> play so much more for far less. Together we pooled up our money and

began to visit a pirated game hawker near our area. He used to charge us not for the game he was selling but the size of the game. The more discs a game had the higher the price. We used to do a lot of research and save up money for the games we wanted to buy. Once we were done playing with them we got so many more games from the barter system." (Chaitanya)

The data for networks of the console players reveals a far less organized network as piracy on locked systems is a risky affair. The responses reveal the choices made by console players in the games they buy and the networks they are part of.

"I was gifted an Xbox 360 when we lived in the US around Christmas time and acquiring games was extremely easy there because one could always rent them or share them. However, once we moved back to India a year later; I began to experience a severe shortage of games I could play. Not many of my new friends played on a console and in time, I felt my console was becoming irrelevant. Left with no other choice I had to rely on my network of fellow players to find a trustable place to "mod" my console. A few of my friends not only accompanied me to the place but also showed me where I could purchase new games after the "modding" process was completed." (Ronik)

"When I bought my Xbox in 2005, the first things my friends realized was that I play only a very specific kind of games. Games like *Zumba*, *Mortal Kombat* and *NFS* were my favorites. I had my console modded and to my friends the limited number of games meant that the

system's cracked features were being unused. They immediately gave me a non-modded console in exchange and the promise of buying me newer versions of *Zumba* and *Just Dance* whenever they launched. The entire exchange was economically beneficial to them and I got to play original games and be a part of authentic experiences." (Radhika)

The importance of being part of a sharing network increases manifold when a player intends to keep his/her console gaming experiences authentic. Most participants acknowledged the high cost of new game acquisition and the players' need to save up money to buy the games they really want, and to share them with the network.

"The only way a console player can afford to play new and original games regularly is to ensure that they have a group of friends who also play on consoles. It is important at the time of buying a console to ensure that the entire network is part of the same ecosystem as it makes things easier in the long run. As a group at the beginning of the year we look at promising games and decide who is going to buy which, the sharing order is decided and reviews of games are carefully examined. We never want to buy a game which underdelivers and isn't worth the money. These decisions ensure we play the best games economically and our consoles' integrities aren't compromised either." (Bhargav)

Bhargav's experiences with his social group reveals the obvious patterns of sharing of games and resources but also unveils a crucial element i.e. sharing of game information. When a group of players sit together and not only debate the games they play and their styles of play

but decide on what games are worthy of being played and their respective merits and de-merits, then it becomes important to understand the player and his/her acts of play not only individually but also as a product of the player group's choices and dynamics. In a simplistic reduction the network as a whole then decides what games are worth their investment, a mechanism that seems very *democratic* at its core. The high costs of games coupled with their desire to wait and carefully examine game reviews indicates their ability to carefully navigate the video game industry and escape the pitfalls[21] of the early adopter in the process.

Co-Play and Shared-Play

Co-play and shared play are unique concepts that have emerged due to the fluid nature of video games as a medium. Co-playing happens when two or more players play a game at the same time on the same machine. Shared-play on the other hand is when players take turns while playing against a common opponent on the same machine. Data from the study reveals that these two playing styles have been an inherent part of offline social play.

> "PvP in two player games has always been a very popular game mode. Me and my friends have always played against each other in a variety of games ranging from, *Need for Speed* to *FIFA.* Games like *WWE*, *Mortal Kombat and Tekken* are games that were bought specifically to match up against each other." (Bodavala)

> "Playing against each other is a welcome change from playing against the A.I. as at times the computer becomes predictable and formulaic.

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[21] Broken, bad and incomplete games have become the norm for players who are early adopters on launch day causing most players to cautiously wait and examine the reviews before making their purchases. For more, please see "Shipping Half-Baked" in the previous chapter.

Playing against a fellow human being introduces a level of unpredictability and leads to more intense play. Consequently, we improve as players as both our understanding of the game and approach to play reaches a higher level. I am part of a group of friends who have been playing FIFA together for about six years now and we have all improved considerably as players." (Chaitanya)

"The best way to improve as a player is to play someone very good consistently, it is just like practicing for sports. You begin as a student learning the game and soon you became an opponent and over-time you are just as good. We as players are always searching for worthy opponents and co-play allows us to play immediately endlessly with no added frivolities." (Naveen)

Most participants acknowledged the importance of co-play in influencing their game styles but at the same time conceded that very few games allowed co-play PvP as a game mode. With the incredible success of PvP and teamplay game modes in online multiplayer formats this doesn't seem surprising as the term "social" has evolved and gained newer dimensions in the internet era.

Shared play unlike co-play is a collaborative team-like play format where players play together to beat a common opponent. The participants of the study consider shared play to be a more active version of watching game-play as the players play and view the game alternatively and in the process, are part of a more engaged experience.

"Me, my brother and my cousins get together to play *God of War*, a game that e all really like and we play turn by turn and a player must cede control when he dies. The next person plays till they die and so on. It becomes incredibly intense when we are in a difficult mission and we all are dying quickly, we use each other's failures to learn and play the longest we can. I am not particularly fond of *God of War* as a game but I play it because at that time it unifies all of us. Since childhood me and my brother have always had a very rocky relationship and *God of War* brought us together. The love of gaming has brought us closer and today we discuss all our gaming pursuits and choices." (Ravi)

To put things in context, at the time of the study Ravi was an avid 40-year-old video game player with degrees in computers and communication. During the interviews, he mentioned the strained relationships he has with the rest of his family, particularly with his brother, who works on a cruise liner and is away from home for around six months a year.

"Gaming brought us closer than family could. We play *God of War* and several hack and slash games together. Gaming together also means that I go down to his house and visit his family, our gaming sessions have brought me closer to all of them. I really look forward to playing together." (Ravi)

Shared play has also drawn positive responses from the rest of the players in the study as they acknowledged its ability in helping decode the game's underlying mechanisms and rules quicker and also bringing the players as a group close in the process.

"I remember all of us playing the entire *Uncharted* series together as a group on the highest difficulty last summer. The game is quite large and very difficult as we must kill an endless number of enemies in a large number of settings whiles solving historical mysteries and puzzles at the same time. The puzzles in particular are quite difficult and we were able to solve them quicker as we kept discussing the various possibilities. As a player of shooter games, I prefer taking headshots a lot but it is only when we played together that I realized my preference could be a weakness. I became a more complete player of shooter games as I watched my friends play and pick up their skills as well." (Prashant)

Shared play unlike co-playing hasn't lost its sheen as participants have found the game mode incredibly useful during marathon gaming sessions. In games where the conditions are tough for players and the AI/opponent extremely difficult shared play has helped players overcome tricky situations and emerge victorious in their ludic journeys as a team. The active, engaged viewing that players are part of in shared play is something that has laid the foundations for e-sports' viewing. Players world over now watch professional and high-level gamers traverse ludic worlds and overcome challenges as part of the e-sports revolution.

However, the data from the participants was clearly indicative of the fact that the offline networks were strictly bound by geographic proximities. Players were in the search of other players who lived close to them as it allowed for them to share games, regularly meet for conversations and also play video games together when the need arises. The nature of association is such that it brings together people of similar socio-economic status as players

are more likely than not looking for other players with similar gaming hardware and playing preferences, which can only happen when the players come from families with similar purchasing power.

However, the respondents were very clear when they pointed out that their networks didn't care about issues of religious heritage or regional affiliations of fellow gamers. Prashant in particular was key to point out that despite his North-Eastern origins he never felt that his gamer friends paid any attention to his origins or any other cultural difference. He specifically viewed the existence of a network of players as a means to find new friends and fit in.

<u>Online Networks</u>

This section focuses on elements of networks that are pre-dominantly based around the internet or web-based services. Once online players have been able to become a part of larger gaming communities and networks that share similar interests and pursuits. The ability to play online also provides newer opportunities of forging bonds among players who are otherwise separated by immense spatial and temporal distances.

Collapse of sharing

The participants were very particular in stating that the arrival of high speed internet and digital online game repositories like *Steam,* EA's *Origin* and Microsoft's *Store* have allowed for access to games that were otherwise physically unavailable. The ease of availability and availability of discounts makes purchasing games at the right times a lot cheaper.

> "The games you want are now just a click away and the ability to buy
>
> them immediately, download and install them saves a lot of time in

searching for the game at a number of stores when availability is low. Sometimes if you time the purchase in line with a sale you can also pickup two games for the price of one. Companies like *Steam* have games priced at very tempting prices in bundles called the *humble bundle*, where you come across a lot of surprisingly good games you otherwise haven't heard of." (Kannan)

Similarly, players who were part of the group that played *cracked* and pirated games were able to tap into networks that specialized in cracking games and distributing them online. The popularization of P2P sharing networks and the use of file transfer technologies like Torrents, Magnets and cloud based file sharing platforms like Cloud File and Megaupload allowed for players to download newer content with relative ease.

"Once Internet speeds increased and we became part of the broadband network, I was able to download entire games online. Earlier A lot of what we were playing was dependent on what games were available to us at the pirated games shop, now we could play any game available on the internet. The crackers were fast and really good we often got games within a week of launch and the onus was now on the player to finish them and move to the next upcoming game. I remember playing a fully finished and final version of Ubisoft's *Watchdogs* two days before the game even launched! Availability was not a problem anymore and the need to share games was over and so was the barter market." (Chaitanya)

Participants shared information that suggested that the online piracy network for video games is a very well organized, efficient system that often tailors to the needs of a wide variety of players. Games are pirated in a variety of versions and players can download the version that most suits them. Participants were also very specific in pointing out that not only are the games pirated but so are the matching updates, expansions packs and the DLC content in a process ensuring that their players receive the complete experience on par with what the game developer offers.

> "Torrent, magnet aggregator websites like *Torrentz*, *Mininova* and *ThePiratebay* allowed us to not only download the games we wanted but also offered us compressed and ripped versions of the games which were less data intensive. In a country like India internet bandwidth is always limited and finding games that are compressed is very important at a time when file sizes have rapidly increased. Over the years there have been a lot of popular game rippers who have compressed games into manageable downloadable sizes like *RG Mechanics* and *Fitgirl*. People like *Skidrow, 3DM* and *Reloaded* are the first to crack complete games but waiting for the rips is always worth it." (Vishal)

Vishal's observations about bandwidth limitations are poignant, as most Internet service providers across the country have in place monthly systems that cap internet speeds after users exceed downloads/uploads beyond a particular limit (called Fair Usage Policy - FUP). Participants have spoken of developing ways that help them to ensure that their internet bandwidth isn't wasted.

"Earlier we would talk about ensuring that we bought the right game and not waste money on something that wasn't good enough. Now we do not have to worry about the money or about the availability but we worry about wasting bandwidth. Bandwidth is a limited resource and we must use it the best we can as breaking the FUP affects everything from browsing speeds to download speeds. We as a group decide what games are worth being downloaded and when they are to release and what version of the game is to be downloaded. Then specific people download the games and we share them ensuring in the process that the FUP is never broken too soon." (Prashant)

Prashant's experience with limited bandwidth is a clear indicator that though there has been a decline in sharing of games and a collapse of the barter system in the traditional sense, sharing of content among networks remains a common practice that allows them to get past this limitation. Players from the study have indicated a mix of play habits as they often indulge in both single player campaigns and multiplayer game modes. High internet speeds are extremely essential during multiplayer sessions and the value of not breaking the FUP for a player cannot be stressed enough.

Tapping into Established Networks

The availability of internet has also allowed for players to become a part of the global gaming community as they now have access to the latest gaming information which includes new announcements, trailer launches of upcoming games, hardware and other related information. Participants also indicated an increase in proliferation of India specific information and content across global gaming websites.

"The news for video games was very limited prior to the internet and we were often dependent on magazines and newspapers, information which is rarely current and immediate. On the internet, we have access to specialized websites that cater only to video game related news. My websites of choice are *IGN India* and *Polygon*, checking them frequently multiple times a day has become a regular habit." (Ram)

"One of the biggest reasons for starting my website was to provide India specific content. It was at a time when gaming and the internet were both largely limited to urban cities and the only places we could seek information for games was from websites which didn't consider India to be important in the global gaming scheme of things. Even today with a lot of gaming websites having India editions we are better off in terms of local content as everything we write is from the perspective of the Indian gamer." (Ishaan)

Participants were also keen to point out that dedicated gamers of specific games have used data aggregating and archiving platforms like *Wikis* to collaboratively establish platforms that are one-stop places where a player can find all the information he/she seeks about the game. The use of technologies like Wikis to garner user generated information for an experience centric medium like video games seems ideal as players can both contribute their experiences and learn from others.

"Most of the games I play on mobile be it *Deck Heroes, Clash of Clans* or *Clash Royale* all of them have very active Wikis and Chat forums where player actively discuss a variety of information. All my early

deck building strategies for *Deck Heroes* like *Melding* strategies were suggested by the Wiki, similarly for *Clash Royale* my line-up of cards, my approach to use low elixir cards for instance were also ideas I picked up from a forum message. The ideas need modifications and finetuning to be implemented successfully but they allow us to see the game from a different perspective." (Prashant)

"For real-time gamers like players of *FIFA's Ultimate Team* where the game mode has a fully functional card market that is a near replication of the commodities market, web platforms like *Futhead and Futbin* have been incredibly useful. Futhead provides players information on all the new cards launched (weekly) and all the changes and modifications made in the way the game works, it also provides players with a forum space where players can debate the strengths and weaknesses of cards and the strategies to be used. Futbin provides players with real time prices of cards on the market and gives players a general idea of how many coins are needed to purchase the players they desire. I use Futhead and Futbin almost daily to buy and sell cards and build and plan my teams for competitions and tournaments. (Ishaan)

While tapping into established networks seems extremely important for players of multiplayer games, participants were also very specific about the benefits derived from dedicated gaming communities for single player games. The use of forums for debating decisions in-gam and as well as a way to find out parts of the game plot missed out on due to in-game choices were very important. Players also depended on such communities to find

and share hidden places, Easter-eggs and various surprising/unexpected happenings from the game.

> "Witcher 3 was one of my most favorite games ever and I spent a large number of hours completing it. A game with many possible endings I wasn't very happy with the one I got as my in-game choices hurt my chances of finding the lead character a suitable partner in the end-game scenario. I used the wiki to find all the possible alternate endings in order to find a more suitable one from the one I had achieved. Finishing a huge game like that is a very very difficult task and not to get the ideal ending hurts a lot. You of course do not have the time to replay for a different ending but you can find some comfort by reading the endings of others and contemplate where we went wrong." (Chaitanya)

However, in the case of Chaitanya his hope of finding a better ending in the forums and careful examination of all possible end-game scenarios can be likened to life's regret-filled equivalent "What could have been" moment. In that frame, the forums serve as a place for alleviation from play induced anguish and the other players' comments and experiences in a way serve the purpose of a support-group.

Casts and Streams

Building game mods (different from modding of consoles), *Machinima*, designing custom levels, creating *Mashup* videos are all examples of content created by players while negotiating with video games. *Twitch*, *YouTube Gaming* and *Ustream* are streaming platforms that are extensions of players' in-game experiences as they allow players to broadcast their

ludic journeys live on the internet and in the process, have ushered in the global game viewing revolution. Players can now not only watch others play their favorite games but can also watch their favorite players in action.

Livestreaming of content has offered players a global dimension to social gaming as their gaming pursuits no longer seem trivial with the advent of e-sports and pro-players. Most of the participants acknowledged the importance of watching game videos at times when they were not playing as it allowed for them to extend the in-game thought and strategy process.

> "I began watching players play *World of Warcraft* (WoW) my favorite online game on Twitch and I was hooked. The ability to watch others play and think how you would have reacted at that instance is a great benefit, it allows you to evaluate the efficiency of your decisions and at the same time allows you to be reflexive and adaptive. Watching pro-players in action also allows you to be able to judge the gulf between you and the best and helps you improve if you wish to."
> (Kannan)

The participants in the group who were streamers of gaming content on the other hand felt that it takes an immense amount of courage to be able to put your content online and expose oneself to possible criticism and ridicule.

> "Gamers and video game players are a tough crowd to please, for some reason all of us are hyperactive and extremely impatient, seeking immediate results. I have often watched people streamers face challenges in-game and being ridiculed in the comments by viewers

for not being good enough. The tones of the comments are harsh and at times extremely rude. I have always wanted to stream my content but I fear this and therefore I have refrained so far." (Ram)

The gamers though acknowledge the fact that having a successfully viewed web-stream service is a great source of revenue from content platforms and is essential if a player wants to look at playing video games as a career option. Money is a numbers game, more the number of views for a stream the higher the broadcast revenue and the larger is a gamers popularity.

"As a professional video game reviewer, my reader-base expects me to show them what I am playing and how good I am at playing games. The website channel also helps me to benchmark new hardware and preview, review upcoming games. The shift I made from Delhi to Bengaluru was precisely to further my streaming channels. I stream on both *Twitch* and *YouTube Gaming* in all screen resolutions keeping in mind the bandwidth requirements of my Indian viewer base. A lot goes into planning a stream both content and quality wise, the need to draw repetitive audiences is key. My viewers however are very difficult to please, a lot of comments in my streams are very discouraging as they cannot seem to understand that as a reviewer I need to be an above average gamer at everything and do not have the time or patience to excel in a specific one." (Ishaan)

In the case of EA's popular online game mode FIFA Ultimate Team (FUT) pro players and online streamers like *Nepenthez, Huge Gorilla, AA9 Skillz, AJ3* and *Fuji* have extremely large

viewer bases (Nepenthez has close to 2 million subscribers on YouTube) and cast specific content series that players watch every day following, debating their in-game decisions, and choices picking up in-game tips in the process.

> "I began playing DoTA 2 as a challenge to a friend who was a veteran and refused to acknowledge my credentials as a gamer because I didn't play DoTA2. At the beginning my journey in DoTA 2 was all about learning enough to beat the friend and prove to him that I was better. I began playing and was finding things difficult, when I began to watch others' matches and also began to scour the comments' forums accompanying the videos for information and tips. Over time I mastered my playstyle and through sheer hard work and experience, two years later, I am much better than my friend ever was. I have a higher ranking and a much better standing in-game. I learnt quicker and improved faster as I continuously watched and incorporated newer techniques." (Ram)

The game-specific streams that participants watch can be classified into three categories on the basis of the content in the streams and the reason they watch the streams. The first kind of streams are review streams which review new changes, characters, developments in-game and analyze the resultant changes in the game-world and underlying mechanics. The second kind of streams are ones which are entertainment centric and are often either compilations of hilarious in-game instances or are variations in the way a game is to be played, such series often focus less on the quality of play in-stream and instead seek to maximize viewers by using lighter content. The final set of streams are specific series designed to serve a certain purpose, like document the progress of a player through a game

world from start to finish or a stream that is designed to teach players new skills in-game. These streams often have their own set of rules which not only make the journey more challenging for the streamer but also distinguish the content from rival streams.

> "For a game like DoTA 2 there are a lot of new characters and rule changes all the time, it takes a lot of time for a player to figure out the micro-changes only through game-play. We watch a lot of videos on Steam's streaming platforms as players review new characters and developments. We cannot take their tips at full value but it is always better going into play with a general idea." (Vishal)

> "A lot of times I just sit back from play and want to relax and unwind, at times like these I don't wish to play but also don't want to leave the game-world. I immediately just move to Twitch or YouTube to watch videos that have titles that begin with the phrase the most incredible fails and so on and so forth. It is an entertaining watch but also makes sure we never do the same mistakes." (Ram)

> "One of the best things we do on our streams from *CS: GO* and *League of Legends* is to select the funniest, most intense, unbelievable moments and cut them into short videos. These videos are of far less time durations than whole streams and generate a lot of views. A lot of times these videos attract fresh viewers to streams." (Ishaan)

Data from the study suggests that players have begun to rely on streams and user generated video content from other players for a variety of reasons like watching solutions to ludic challenges, learning to watch from play, observing others' strategies, and lastly if they are

seeking entertainment and information. The emergence of streaming platforms and the ability to monetize streams has provided players with a huge amount of content of their choice.

Availability of content streams for players is an evolution of the simpler practice of watching gameplay as a means of learning ways to successfully chart the ludic *gamescapes* and adapt, adjust or mold their styles of play in accordance with the players they admire and look up to. The always accessible nature of the digital streams allows players to not only watch once but to also keep re-watching and patiently improving as opposed to the earlier version where watching as a means of learning play was only limited to a specific instance. This dimension of permanence allows for players to not only critically examine the variance in levels of play (between themselves and the players they are watching) but also reverse-engineer specific moves and try and better understand how complex decisions are made in split-second windows. This deeper level of engaged watching then allows for the building of causal ludic links in the players' psyche.

Online Play

This section focuses on the social elements that exist during the instances of pre-play, play and post-play. In the interviews, participants explored the various communication tools that games provide in the game world. Most online games provide players with text message services and microphone support as abilities to communicate. While, chat-boxes and audio conversations are the norm in most multiplayer games there are several kinds of games where the nature of ludic engagement doesn't allow for these forms of communication. *Clash Royale* fir instance uses a simple four emoji method for communication (laughter, rage, tears

and thumbs up) combined with six simple phrases that players simply tap on while remaining undistracted. Innovative game design has seen the emergence of similarly intuitive ways to communicate for players. However, the participants strongly felt the importance to communicate amongst teammates was key in team based games like *DoTA 2, League of Legends, CS: GO and World of Warcraft.*

> "When I match up with random players as team-mates in *DoTA 2* one of the most fundamental things that I do is to check every players' profile and quickly analyze their gaming style. A look at their playing history and choices of characters selected helps me determine not only their role in the team but also provides me with a vague understanding of their playing styles and preferences. Using all this information I then decide the character I am going to pick, my role in the team and my style of play. I have found this decision system to be very effective and as a consequence I have become a very versatile player. A player who can play any role in the team and can effectively use any character." (Vishal)

The participants also felt that the use of text based message systems though helpful in team-based multiplayer events is extremely difficult to manage while also processing in-game action of the opponents and combining with, coordinating teammates' decisions. Most multiplayer participants preferred the use of a mic, headset arrangement that enabled the teammates to communicate seamlessly.

> "While I play *League of Legends* or *CS: GO* I always talk to my teammates using the headset. We win as a team and lose as one, all

our characters are controlled in conversation. No decision is taken without consultation from other partners as possible scenarios are quickly predicted and analyzed. Everything from attack strategies to combinations and inventory management is all done accordingly. Despite all this the worlds of MOBAs are extremely chaotic." (Ishaan)

Post-game the participants indicated the use of in-game features that allowed them to select opponents and teammates into categories that allowed the players to communicate, play with them afterward. Organized platforms like Steam allow players to follow profiles of other fellow players and similarly mobile multiplayer games allow players to link their game avatars to services like Facebook and Google+. The participants found these services beneficial as they allowed them to find friends instantaneously.

"For me Online Play is all about meeting new people and making friends. I always make sure to send a friend request to players who I find play the way I do and play well. Over the years, I have made a lot of friends in *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. A lot of them are from Australia and New Zealand and slowly I found I was switching my timings to play with them and then eventually I just moved to their server." (Kannan)

The ability to make friends in game-worlds by eclipsing physical and spatial barriers from offline-spaces has always been an alluring attribute of the medium. Yee, Bartle and Taylor have similar findings from players. However, it is important to understand that in an online game space at the time of play the player has a plethora of options to communicate, bond and socialize with fellow players and across various phases pf play. Pre-play asking a close

friend to initiate a plays session or be a part of another session, in-play various comments, suggestions in response to the reconfiguration of the game-space and post-play to reflect on game, give feedback or find new players and competitors seem like actions that have been deeply internalized by players in order to make the online gaming space their own.

<u>Social and Play</u>

Mentors and Mentees

On the 29th of March 2015, I walk into Kannan's house at around 10 AM, I watch him playing *Guild Wars 2* on a two-monitor setup where the game is being played on one and he is *Skyping* with someone from Australia on the other. As he talks with him on the headset, deep in conversation; at the same time, he is also clicking his mouse and tapping on the keyboard at a fever-pitch attempting to kill a giant polar bear on the other screen. The image of him being deeply engrossed in conversation and showcasing remarkable levels of multitasking to clobber the polar bear is deeply ingrained in my head. After the execution of the bear, consumption of health potions, repairing of armor and teleporting to a safe place, he explains:

> "*Guild Wars 2* is a new MMORPG that I just started playing, it has an extremely vibrant community and I am looking to it as an alternative for *WoW*. The best way I seem to learn the game is to identify an experienced master and learn from him. Games are the same as school we need to be taught the basics first. Watching others in action and allowing them to watch my play and receive feedback seems to be the quickest way to learn. It worked very effectively in the case of *WoW*."
>
> (Kannan)

Kannan's strategy comes across as a simple one but what stands out is his ability to leverage the communication platforms available in-game to initiate conversations with experienced players and then move the communication process to platforms that are not-game centric. The use of Skype and video-chats indicates a desire to learn and at the same time unmasks the gamer's identity. Most participants in the study admitted that they felt safe and protected behind a gamer tag as their offline lives remained inaccessible.

> "Learning is all about trust, I spend a considerable amount of time in
> in-game conversations to judge the kind of person a player is and only
> then I move the conversation to other platforms. I understand that
> there is a chance that a malicious player might hack my Skype Id and
> gain access to sensitive information. Therefore, I have a separate id
> for gaming and I normally spend a week, screening players and only
> then ask to learn from them." (Kannan)

The practice of finding mentors among game players seems common as most participants speak having been shown the ropes in new games by those with more experience. However, only two in the group had found mentors online. Most participants felt that if there are no mentors available offline then they could learn from streams and casts of established players.

> "I am friends with a couple of players who are very very good in *WoW*
> and I have been friends with them for over two years. Over time we
> have chatted and I have learnt a lot from them. I have become a much
> better player and we have now exchanged Skype ids, emails and
> phone numbers. I trust them a lot more than some of my offline

friends. We may have never met in person but the friendships are

strong and we can count on each other." (Bodavala)

Some participants were uncomfortable with the idea of having mentors in game spaces as they felt that interacting with experienced players could take away the process of self-discovery. Mentees would not be able to discover a play-style of their own as they view the game-world from the limited perspectives of the mentors.

"My friends are very good and there have been times that they have

carried me through difficult missions where I am out of my depth and

not very useful. For example, I am nowhere good enough to play at the

mythic difficulty, but I have cleared all the missions on that level. At

the end of the mission I have learnt a lot and also have access to

rewards that I otherwise wouldn't have. A lot of my other friends are

very annoyed with me because they feel I don't deserve those

rewards. But isn't it the same way in life, aren't you successful because

you have successful friends?" (Bodavala)

In the case of Bodavala it is easy to spot that the mentors have not only taught him how to play but are also holding his hand to help clear missions. It is no surprise that his other friends who do not have such highly skilled teammates consider him unworthy of the resultant rewards. Game-spaces like offline spaces do not seem to be fair and representative of lands with equal opportunity as hierarchies also exist in virtual worlds. This makes being part of larger, more powerful networks beneficial to players as they are more likely to benefit from the association than those who don't. While, the conventional understanding of a gamer is heavily reliant on his/her ability to overcome challenges on their own and not seek any

form of assistance from others, players today have begun to rely on their networks and friends for the ludic-choices they make. Most participants agreed to a shift in the larger playing styles from a mere solo hard work based grind approach to one that is more reliant on using team-mates' strengths and the ludic-contexts to their advantage. This shift is indicative of the rise of the thinking and strategizing player as opposed to a hyper masculine approach where players were expected to overcome swarms of enemies by wading through them head-on. Even games today have altered their ludic challenges in order to reflect this trend.

It is difficult to pass judgement on Bodavala's actions as his in-game persona benefits from his offline characteristic of maintaining friendships, a clear indicator that there is more than one way to successfully navigate online game spaces. If the game-world of WoW was a ludic space that was only about clearing challenges and overcoming obstacles, then it would be simpler. However, *Azeroth* is a world that is a simulation with biases that represent the world in which the game was designed and thus Bodavala as a player has only found a new way to manipulate the MMORPG space to his benefit. It is just that it doesn't result in a high quality of play.

SNS and IM platforms in Play

This is the age of social media and a time when entities like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat have become sites of intense interaction. The global acceptance of these platforms has led to a need for re-thinking and re-visiting terms and concepts like community, identity and networks (Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Thiel, 2005; Boyd, 2012; Turkle, 2012) . In an everyday context of video games the participants found that social platforms

have seamlessly integrated with their gaming practices. Their gaming achievements, performances and actions are now often displayed on leaderboards of other friends and vice-versa.

> "In mobile games, especially free to play ones, you always receive an award in-game when you link your game-profile to your Facebook account or Google+ account. A lot of these games then provide more rewards when you share your achievements in-game on your timelines. When me and my friends were playing *Deck Heroes* we were posting a lot of promotional posts to gain in-game coupons. We were indefinitely spamming all our friends' accounts in the process. It's the same with games like *Farmville* or *CSR Racing* or *Candy Crush*. Developers are always in the search of newer players and accessing our social networks is a great way to find them." (Prashant)

Participants have also found social networks to be a great way to follow their favorite players and also share a variety of content ranging from game trailers, upcoming in-game events to memes. They have found social media's ability to aggregate and the resultant hypermediacy extremely useful to communicate instantaneously. The players have also found social media as a simpler way to connect to companies that design their favorite games and in the process, provide feedback and also seek customer support immediately.

> "I do not play much on the mobile but it is a good way to pass time during one's daily travel. *Deck heroes* was a game that I began playing because a lot of my friends from my childhood were playing it and being here in the US away from the home it was a way to stay close to

them and beat being homesick. One day I accidentally went swimming with my phone and damaged it, post-service when I logged in the game had lost all my save progress. It was close to a year's effort, all in vain. I was very hurt, I wrote to the developers on Facebook and I had my saved files back in 3 hours. I don't know any other way this could have been restored so quickly. Social networking makes the developer-player gap seem not so wide." (Chaitanya)

Participants have also found social networking platforms to be ideal places to showcase in-game rewards, share scores, performance videos, show games they're playing and comment on their favorite games and gaming experiences. Being present on social networking platforms has helped players to not only find and become part of communities of their choice but has also allowed them to discover newer niche communities and engage with their games of choice on a much deeper level.

"I have found Instagram to be a very effective tool to share small clips and still images of my in-game performances. This allows for my followers to have immediate access to my gaming activities and have a general idea of my gaming life apart from what they see in my streams." (Ishaan)

"One of the first things I do whenever I buy a new game is to post it on *FB* or *Insta* with a catchy status message, it is one of the easiest ways to announce to all my gaming friends. The posts are often followed by a lot of messages and conversations about the games. I like that a lot,

it means we do not have to meet physically to discuss the game."

(Bodavala)

Moving on from social networking platforms, participants also found the use of Instant messaging apps like *WhatsApp*, *Hangouts, Line* and *Telegram* useful to extend the social dimensions of their gaming lives. WhatsApp in particular was extremely popular as a platform as players frequently used the group features offered from these platforms. The players of mobile platforms preferred the simple native features that the apps offered.

"I use a variety of Instant Messaging apps for my games, I use WhatsApp for *Deck Heroes* among my friends, I also have a unique group for *Clash Royale* and *Clash of Clans*, it is an easy way to communicate among friends and fellow players. All these games have in-game guild or clan based messaging but these platforms are more focused and simpler. If I have to show something new I achieved I simply take a screenshot and share. The comments and messages then follow." (Prashant)

Players have also found that using IM platforms extends the life of older more conventional games as participants often shared new developments, tips and other related information. Participants accepted that it was common for players to be part of several WhatsApp or Line groups with each catering towards a different game. Owing to the reflexive nature and the snowball technique of this study I myself was part of six distinct WhatsApp groups and was constantly in touch with the participants as they updated me with their schedules, achievements in play, comments and other related information.

"I am part of several groups at the moment a group for fellow reviewers, a group for my online streamers, a group for players of *Forza*, a group for players of *Halo,* one for *FIFA, Bloodborne* and so on and so forth. WhatsApp groups are fun but at times there is an information overload across channels and it becomes too much!" (Ishaan)

Players have however found that a group has a lot to offer if it is carefully managed and all the members of the group are committed to keep contributing to it. At the same time players also acknowledged that a lot of times groups just remain inactive and at times go defunct as people do not respond and over time it just becomes redundant.

"In *Deck Heroes*, I petitioned to be part of a top-level guild with some great players. The entire process was amazing, on the in-game Personal message system I was first given a line id, I was supposed to write to, then I was interviewed via Line and screenshots of all my cards and decks were carefully scrutinized. After the scrutiny, I was allowed into the line and guild community. The group was very well organized and there were images filed with in-game tips and strategies for new members. There were also rules and regulations that were clearly displayed and players were constantly made aware of them, I had never seen anything like this before and soon realized that they were a top guild because they had all these things in place. There is always the need for long term strategy and vision to succeed." (Prashant)

The cybercafé and the gaming parlor

On a sunny Sunday Afternoon in April I visit *Spawn* a cybercafé/gaming center that is a hub for players seeking some multiplayer action. A place with seemingly endless rows of neatly stacked LCD screens and a large number of people playing a variety of games, it is a hub of activity and restless energy as the air is flooded with sounds of keyboard click-clacks and rapid mouse clicks. A lot of participants who play multiplayer games spent many hours in places like these.

> "In an Indian context affording a personal computer is at times difficult, to own a computer with the hardware to play the latest games is an even more difficult challenge. The appeal of places like Cybercafés lies in their ability to provide good internet, hardware and a place for players to meet and take on the world together." (Ram)

Ram visits a cybercafé by the name *Diginet* and he was keen to point out that he plays here because of the quality of the clientele. Over the last two years he has made a great number of new friends who he constantly teams up with while playing his favorite MOBA *DoTA 2*.

> "My play time at Diginet is all about marathon playing sessions. I generally play for about 7-8 hours at a stretch and one can sustain interest and intensity only when the teammates are of a same level or higher. I prefer Diginet because of its location and its great pricing options, you often get great discounts when you buy play hours in bulk. The longer I play the cheaper per hour it gets. I generally buy 10 hours at a close to 30 per cent discount." (Ram,)

My visit to Spawn was to watch Vishal and Ronik play in conditions they call 'ideal'. Vishal has been visiting Spawn for close to six years and always spends about 10-12 hours a week at the gaming parlor. While they agree with Ram's observations of marathon gaming and high quality of players. Their constant visits to Spawn are more of a ritual today.

> "I played at Spawn when I used to bunk classes about six years ago, I used to spend all day playing *DoTA* 1 then. Over time I became really good at the game and a lot of people at Spawn began to seek me in their teams. My credibility had risen and I began to become a part of their better band of players. Once DoTA 2 arrived, I hesitated to make the jump and delayed the learning process considerably. Till date I haven't made up for that lost time as I have never been as good as I was on the earlier version." (Vishal)

> "The best thing about Spawn is that it is not only a place to play games but also place from where the best players team up and take part in competitions across the city. It is a great place to find the right mix of players you are looking for your team when you want to play games as a career. Today all our friends from Spawn are available as our friends on Steam we can play with them from our homes or anywhere in the world. But we keep going back because it is nostalgic and we all have great memories there, it is the place to be. I met Vishal there in 2013 and we have been friends ever since." (Ronik)

The participants agreed that places like Spawn and Diginet were ideal for players to find mentors, seek new teammates, have intense sessions of play and at the same time recognize players better than themselves and get the chance to play against/with them.

> "A player I look up to is an acquaintance from Spawn called Gaurav, who has a Match Making Ranking (MMR) of 6500 (Vishal is 4000 lower MMR wise and averages at 2300-2600), we call him the MMR vending machine. He is an extremely hardworking player who spends close to 8 hours a day on DoTA 2, just watching him play is education. I played on his team once and watching him play was intimidating. Those two games were excruciating as every move of his so refined and perfect. He pulls the right move at the right time at the right place every single time and you worry if you are letting him down by being on his team. It is only in places like Spawn you can meet players like these and watch their entire process." (Vishal)

Catering to players' intense sessions of play it is common practice for gaming parlors to offer services of food and refreshments to their clientele. My visit of Spawn allowed me to witness players using food and drink breaks to discuss in-game strategy and decisions as they quickly wolfed down food and rushed to try and execute their newer plans.

> "The best thing about Spawn is the ability to play uninterrupted, the food is inexpensive and the drinks are not necessarily aerated you have options between lemonade, iced tea and at times butter milk and *lassi* in the summer. I really like having *Maggi* in between games and having a smoke to clear my head and talk I tout with my teammates.

Being a versatile player and having to constantly adapt my role with

every game, I really like having a clear, well thought out strategy on

which I can build and improvise depending on the situation. The

conversation helps me figure that out and also realize the full abilities

of my teammates." (Vishal)

The data from the study suggests that the cybercafé and the gaming parlors are ideal places for players to not only gain access to machines built to provide a recommended experience of play, but are also effective places to build networks, skills and make friends in online and offline spaces. The ability to provide players with newer challenges and role-models to look up to and play with/against comes across as a conducive environment to encourage newer ludic journeys as players began to explore their gaming selves and identities in relation with their contextual sceneries. For someone like Vishal coming across Gaurav was a jolting experience as it encouraged him to leave his confines of comfort and aspire higher (both Vishal and Ronik were comfortable in the 2300-2600 MMR range and had become part of a self-proclaimed 'rut') as a player. What places like Spawn and Diginet offer extends far beyond being a mere aggregating hub for players as they have overtime become enablers to a gamut of relationships for their clientele and in the process become crucial nodes in the process of shared and social play.

With regards to usage of public places of access like cybercafés and the gaming parlors, several participants in the study acknowledged that these places were often exclusively frequented by boys/men. Women/girl players were rare if not non-existent in places like *Spawn* and *Diginet*. Even during my visits to the two gaming parlors I found no women/girl gamers and the approach to play among the male players present indicated that their

mannerisms, style of conversation and overall behavior were attuned to the acceptance that women were seldom present in such environments. The barriers of entry to such a place for women/girl players might seem non-existent at first but are significant as a lack of women players could lead to a discomfort resultant from the abnormal gendered skewedness.

On a broader societal level, such places also have barriers of entry built into their core functioning as they are only accessible to people with a high level of technological proficiency. While these barriers may not generally be directly applicable to people of a specific caste or religion, they are however elitist in their way of functioning. Regular marathon sessions of play can only be enjoyed by people in strong financial conditions and who can justify the expenditure on gaming as an activity of leisure.

It is important to note that the player today has at his/her fingertips a plethora of information about a game prior to even beginning the first play cycle, a trend that clearly points towards a professionalization in video game play that was unheard of. However, this development was only possible by the players' embracing of the various modes of sociality that video games and the internet offer. By tapping into specialized communities and forums as well as setting up and actively engaging in their own private ways channels of communication the players have allowed for gaming to leak from the "magic circle" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) into their everyday lives.

Chapter – 6

Conclusion

<u>Overview</u>

About the Study

This study sought to situate the activity of playing video games in the context of the everyday, drawing largely from of the work of Bourdieu, Wittgenstein and Schatzki. Nick Couldry (2004), speaking of Media as Practice, understands everyday rituals, habits and activities as practices that are situated in socio-cultural contexts (; Wittgenstein, 1978; Schatzki, 1996; Couldry, 2004). In an everyday context, specific repetitive acts, when performed over time, acquire new contextual meanings and cease to remain merely acts of habit but become practices. It is in a frame of the everyday that this study attempted to chart the gaming practices of fourteen individuals and capture their individual gaming journeys. Thus, providing us with insights not only into the complex process of the individuals' meaning making and their distinct ludic journeys but also enabling us to comprehend their gaming self-identities in relation to their off-line selves. The larger purpose of the study was to understand the "culture of gaming" in an Indian context by capturing experiences with video games from among a participant pool of video game players from urban India.

The study employed a ludo-narratological framework that synthesized concepts such as Wood's Recursive Space (Wood, 2012), Salen and Zimmerman's Magic Circle (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), Arsenault & Perron's Magic Cycle (Arsenault & Perron, 2008) and Jesper Juul's Puzzle Piece (Juul, 2008) to enable the examination of crucial instants of the gameplay experience such as: pre-play, beginning of play, during play, post-play and the entire loop

that leads up to a new cycle of play. A longitudinal design and snowball strategy was used to pool the participants as Participant Observation (often accompanied with instances of Co-playing), in-depth interviews and diaries were used to collect data as each participant was observed and interacted with in his/her preferred gaming environment(s) seven times over the course of an eighteen-month period.

Analysis and Findings

The study analyzed the players' gaming preferences, styles of play and getting the participants to reflect on their online and offline activities in relation to gaming and arrives arrives at an emic perspective of gamer identity. By getting gamers to reflect on their styles of play and the key attributes that determine what constitutes a "gamer," we arrive at the concept of "gamerworthy." By analyzing the participants' gaming habits, practices and contexts, the study charts players' responses to general industry trends, newer game developments and looks at how the changes affect their psyche and approach to gaming.

Acknowledging the high technological knowhow that the participants possess and the high financial cost of pursuing gaming every day, the study embraces a variety of player practices that define gaming as a practice in India. The existence of organized barter networks, the rise of mobile gaming, the proliferation of cheats, cracks and hacks are all indicative of the players' contesting of ludic sites and finding means of access to denied content. By examining the various online and offline relationships that players maintain, the study is able to analyze how seemingly dispersed, solitary ludic journeys are part of larger networks and how they fit into a global understanding of gaming culture.

Finally, the study also disregards the binary of hardcore gamer/ casual player by suggesting the need for an understanding that accommodates a variety of play styles and platforms and redefines hardcore as a phrase that will be defined by the player's intensity, dedication and regularity of play in conjunction with the value and meaning they attribute to it.

Discussion

One of the foremost objectives of this study was to bridge video game studies and new media studies by arriving at a broad understanding of "gaming culture" in general. To achieve this there was a need to deconstruct the "core gaming experience" by understanding players' gaming practices, attitudes and behaviors. It was also necessary to examine the players' physical and psychological entry into their preferred game-worlds, chart the entire process of repeated logging-in and out of game-worlds and studying the activities that precede and succeed the same. Finally, all this information was collected and examined in a frame where gaming was defined as a key part of the participants' everyday life.

The extent of the term "core gaming experience" is vast and subjective; if we borrow from Bartle (Bartle, 1996) then we realize that all players are motivated by a core set of desires and hopes and in attempting to realize and achieve them they plan their ludic actions, strategies and thoughts. However, it is difficult to repudiate the importance that notions of identity, community, access and current gaming industry trends play in its construction. Most players of video games will point out that the constant repetition of complex and mundane tasks in game-worlds are necessary for them to make the jump from being mere players/actants in the game-world to inhabitants who possess an intimate and organic understanding of the rules and underlying principles that govern the world in question. The

core gaming experience then becomes not just one instant of the in-game experience but becomes the summation of all the instances that preceded this one and the ones that are likely to succeed this one; as players are going to use the skills and abilities acquired from these interactions as building blocks of future ludic experiences.

Identity creation both as a part of the core gaming experience and as an individual's need for self-actualization is a tricky concept amongst players. The mainstream narrative has ensured that players are reluctant to think of themselves as gamers as they trivialize their gaming pursuits by constantly comparing themselves with stereotypical hardcore gamers. For the gaming industry, the narrative of the hardcore gamer is beneficial as it ensures a steady sale of the latest gaming hardware and software thereby providing a dedicated customer base that fuels newer product cycles and a constant demand for continuous technological development and innovation. The need for players to reflect on their gaming habits and put their ludic achievements and efforts in perspective (as a key fragment of their everyday but not the 'only' fragment) is paramount as they will continue to improve and face newer challenges in both online and offline spaces.

The notion of community in the core gaming experience is just as crucial as identity as though the general stereotype looks at players/gamers as asocial and reclusive individuals they are concurrently a part of several networks and communities. Most players are part of a closely-knit core group of players offline with whom they first venture (generally) into online game-worlds. Over time each player begins to identify him/herself with the kind of games they play, the ludic challenges they seek and thus make choices in conjunction with their preferences and become a part of communities with players who play similar kinds of games,

with a similar style. With each new game-world a player enters he/she becomes a part of the newer game's community at the same time juggling the various communities from other metaverses they are a part of. Identity then gains a further new dimension when examined together with community because the player then identifies oneself as a sum product of not only his/her ludic choices and achievements but also as a member of the various online and offline communities they are a part of.

In other words, if one were to understand a sports(wo)man/ athlete we would begin by first identifying the sport they specialize in, then focus on the role/position they play, then study their style of play and approach to the sport by looking at their past/current performances and the place they originate from and the training academies they were part of. To identify who they are, we then need to look at the teams they play for, the events they take part in and the clubs/teams that employ them. Lastly, in order to complete this understanding, we must also look at their endorsements and other off the field activities like their personal lives, their behaviors, attitudes with regards to teammates and fellow competitors, their opinions, beliefs on issues beyond sports and the public's perception of them in general. If we are to think of players of video games as sports(wo)men then we will need a similar understanding of the players to arrive at a core understanding of game experience for each of them and spend considerable time with the nuances, to explore both their gaming approaches and identities as well as the limits to which the game-worlds can be manipulated in the vision of the players' approach to play.

In such an understanding of gaming culture, the role of the everyday is magnified several fold and it becomes so much larger than the "mundane" that Duncum calls it (Duncum, 2002),

nor does it merely remain a site of study where we analyze non-reflexive immersive acts bound by the immediacy of current experiences and activities. It instead transforms into a spatial construct where the "magic" of play is constantly re-created, each time with subtle variations and nuances, a place where players actively seek to maximize the efficiency of their efforts in order to fashion the outcomes they desire. It is in the constant repetition, learning from past-experiences and numerous sessions of strategizing and furthering their understanding of the gameworld's blueprints that proficient players can quickly improvise and overcome difficult challenges. The everyday then becomes a fluid site that encompasses both the player's offline and online lives becoming a place of identity creation; a cauldron of intense activity where players/gamers are forged. To take further Shaw and Taylor's adapted quote from Simone de Beauvoir, "one is not born a gamer, one becomes one", (Shaw, 2013; Taylor, 2009) this is how one becomes a gamer.

<u>The Indian Context</u>

Gaming in India is often dismissed or trivialized as an activity that players are expected to "grow out of" over time and become responsible adults who are expected to contribute to their family, society and the nation at large by attuning their lifestyles towards careers that are financially stable and contribute to the increasingly capitalist economy where time for activities of leisure has dwindled considerably. The incredibly high cost of gaming hardware and software coupled with a need for high technical knowhow are barriers of entry for people willing to play video games as a leisure time activity.

However, a large section of the urban population in the country has fond memories of playing games such as *Contra, Mario, Duck Hunt* and a slew of other games that were available on

affordable consoles from Sega and Nintendo. A player base that grew up with a habit of playing video games and viewed them as an important part of their childhood and adolescence. All the participants from this study are from urban cities across the country and hailed from financially well to do families where parents didn't mind affording them with gaming equipment.

Of the fourteen participants, six (Chaitanya, Bhargav, Bodavala, Radhika, Naveen and Ravi) have since left India in search of higher education and for professional reasons thus leaving behind their preferred gaming environments and spaces in a hope to further their standards of living. Two of the participants (Kartik and Lavanya) have since been promoted and have consequently seen their jobs get more intense and gaming for them has since become a stress buster and they now think of game-worlds as a sanctuary on the weekends. One of the participants (Kannan) got married during the eighteen-month period and was struggling to explain to his spouse what his ludic achievements were and why his desire to play were necessary components of his "everyday". Another participant (Ram) finished his undergraduate degree and decided to pick up animation and game design courses in a hope to design the kinds of games he loves. The reviewer's (Ishaan) YouTube channel has become quite successful as it has sixteen thousand loyal subscribers and the content on the channel has garnered over two and a half million views; key steps in monetization of user generated gaming content on the internet.

At the beginning of this study when I was yet to arrive at a framework and a lens to analyze gaming by, I thought of the realm of video game players as a digital subculture; an approach I soon discarded once I realized how mainstream gaming had become since the arrival of

smartphones and high speed mobile internet. However, I return to that subcultural understanding to analyze the Indian context; not subcultural in the paradigmatic way described by the Birmingham school but a nuanced post-subcultural understanding akin to Muggleton's (Muggleton, 1997).

Clark borrows from Muggleton when he analyses the death of punk as it went mainstream and points out how people involved in the punk movement cleaned up their acts, and went mainstream in search for jobs and then "life happened" (Clark, 2003). The same can be said of the Indian video game player as Radhika puts it "I make enough money now to afford the latest gaming console and games but it is just that I want to experience other things as well. Travel and see the world is what I am now focused on." Kannan in a similar vein adds "Gaming is not a priority anymore. I will try and make time for it but won't be too worried if I cannot. I am trying to find different server times (to play on) so that I can make time for my family but I have been largely unsuccessful.". A similar viewpoint is also reinforced by Ravi when he says "The only reason I am the only one gaming among my friends in my age group is because I am not married, don't have kids and am not burdened by E.M.I.s to pay. I can afford to simply take time off from work and pursue a leisure activity." To put things in perspective, when a player like Kannan who has spent over three thousand hours over a four-year period in a game-world is willing to leave it at all at the drop of a hat, then "life happening" must be a force to reckon with.

However, gaming as an activity is going increasingly mainstream worldwide as popular culture has begun to embrace it and avenues of merchandising from gaming apparel to accessories to gaming grade chairs, hardware and soft drinks (Mountain Dew Game Fuel)

have increasingly become markers of identity creation and establishment for players and gamers both online and offline. Newer players in India are embracing conventional gaming platforms and for the ones who have grown out of them the mobile phone seems an ideally suited device to rekindle their love and relive nostalgic moments. A platform where the games designed do not focus on the need for marathon gaming sessions, the free to play nature and the ability to play just about anywhere allows for former-gamers to reconnect as popular established franchises like Pokémon and Super Mario have been incredibly successful while making the mobile jump.

India as a nation has begun to embrace an increasingly digital identity and with an inevitable increase in proliferation of internet (post- Reliance Jio[22]) that is fueled by ever falling prices of mobile and broadband connectivity; has become an attractive venue for game developers. While for the time being the spurt in the player base is largely mobile and smartphone driven, in the long run conventional gaming companies could develop newer strategies to tap in as well. With the rise of e-sports several participants acknowledged the possibility of players pursuing pro-gaming in the not too distant future as they hope the country's infrastructure will realize the dream of providing lag-free internet and uninterrupted power supply. Similarly, there has also been a considerable rise in online streamers of content as gamers/players have begun to provide the Indian audiences with specific 'desi' content. If their efforts do take off soon there will be a slew of players/content creators with dedicated audiences which they will use as leverage with gaming companies to acquire better gaming

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[22] The launch of Reliance's Jio mobile services in August 2016 disrupted Indian mobile tariffs as the promotional offer introduced voice and data completely free. The success of the promotional offer and subsequent low-cost plans helped the new network amass 100 million subscribers by February 2017. Post the launch of Jio's services, tariffs for mobile data and voice packages across carriers have plummeted by close to 90 percent, making Internet on mobile phones much more accessible.

gear and as Clark succinctly puts it "sell potato chips" in the process (Clark, 2003), but one can always hope that in this chaotic process of the creation, recognition and capitalization of a sizeable neo-Indian player base the country can become a global gaming site where new game content is conceptualized, developed and produced not merely tested.

Limitations and possibilities for future research

Studying the video game has been an interesting challenge to researchers as the fluidity of content on offer and the agency provided to the users by the nature of the medium allow for players to traverse ludic journeys that are unique and replete with a wide range of experiences that are often consequences of their in-game choices and decisions. The strength of this study lies in its approach where rather than studying the video game's narrative or ludic content it instead studied players' experiences and negotiations as a practice (Couldry, 2004) situated in the frame of the everyday.

Such an approach allowed us to not only study ludic experiences but also delve into other key concepts such as player identity, reflections on playing styles and practices, the situation of the repetitive act of playing video games in an everyday schedule, the various contexts and circumstances that allow and inhibit the practice, grappling with emerging industry trends and tapping and establishing networks and communities of play. The concepts though seem frivolous and unnecessary when one attempts to study the medium; but with video games one cannot study the medium without the experience and through the course of the study I have come to realize that it is impossible to study the experience without arriving at a holistic understanding of the player and a careful examination of his/her gaming pursuits, achievements and motivations.

The challenge however with an approach that emphasizes on the need for diversity and examines the unique, is the ability to then arrive at a broader understanding of gaming-culture at large as exclusive ludic journeys seldom have points of convergence. This study understands its participants' gaming practices as not merely ludic acts but as complex webs where contexts, choices and offline lives were undistinguishably intertwined. The effort then was to study both the contextual and the experiential as a composite and use the flitting existences between the offline and the online to answer the broader research questions.

Future research can use an understanding of the everyday coupled with a framework of practice in order to study gamers' lifestyles and choices as part of a broader patchwork where their consumption of other mediated content can also be studied in conjunction with their ludic activities thereby providing us with a complex but contextually layered understanding of players and the gaming community at large. Something similar to what Boellstorff calls a "gaming of cultures" (Boellstorff, 2006). The same framework can also be used to study specific game worlds as sites of constant activity and use players' experiences to study the game world's evolution and transformation over time and observe the consequent alterations to players' approaches and strategies in relation to the aforementioned changes. The game world can also be studied as a culture of its own where specific acts attain new meanings in-game. Studies could focus on the various in-game traditions, rituals and processes and the constant blurring of the real and virtual divide in the process as these acts acquire real meanings in the players' psyche over time.

We are on the cusp of an immersive and engagement bound revolution in the way we consume media and seek entertainment. If the success of platforms such as Netflix, Twitch

and YouTube Gaming are any indicator then the industry has become aware of the need to break traditional spatial and temporal biases in order to allow for a more actively engaged and immersed post-modern media user. Similar changes have also been observed with other media forms with the rise of trends like fanfiction, machinima and popularization of other forms of user generated content.

Lastly, I firmly believe that the concept of "gamerworthiness" will be extremely useful as a framework to understand players' ludic approaches, choices and decisions in reference to the larger "metagaming" ways of play as well as put them in perspective at a time when e-sports will be the norm. With e-sports poised to go mainstream, I anticipate the need for newer ways to measure players' ludic prowess and potential as a well-structured and organized system of recruiting pro and amateur gamers will be put in place. Mere statistics and in-game numbers may then not suffice to indicate how successful a player will be in adapting to the various challenges that the fluid nature of a medium throw up, where rules and approaches are constantly being re-worked and re-claimed. Gamerworthiness then, could be filled out conceptually with newer dimensions as the symbolic and cultural capital of e-sports and pro-gamers will begin to rival their offline counterparts.

This study hopefully contributes an additional set of tools and questions that can further our critical understanding and analysis of video-games, gaming experience, player's ludic journeys and larger gaming culture in general.

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Annexures

Interview Guide

1. Tell me, what do the terms *video games* and *play* mean in your life

   a. How important are these two terms in the life you currently lead?

   b. When did you start playing video games? And since when have you recognized they become a big part of your lives?

   c. Would it be alright for me to say, playing video games is a *habit* of yours?

2. Could you tell me a bit about the first games you played and how did you feel when you played them?

   a. Was there a specific genre or play style you associate to those early games? Anything that you can recall

   b. Could you recall for me a few incidents from these early experiences with video games?

   c. Have you gone back since then and played any of those early games, since then?

3. What is it that you like most about the video games you play?

   a. What makes you like a particular video game, give me a few instances from games you really liked?

   b. Is there a specific kind of game you prefer?

   c. Would you consider yourself a specialized gamer who plays only a specific genre and kind of games or would you consider yourself a player who plays any fun game irrespective of the genre or style?

d. Any video game franchise you're a fan of? In other words, a series of games in which you feel it is mandatory to play every title in the series?

4. Would you agree to term that no two players can play a game in the same way?

   a. So extending from that idea what kind of a player do you think you are one that plays games to understand the story and plot of the game or one who plays games for the fun of it?

   b. How important do you think it is for a game to have a great story for you to have fun while playing it? Tell me from your personal experiences.

   c. How important do you think it is to have a great user experience while playing a game? Would it be alright for you to have fun playing a game without having a story or logical purpose to your actions in those games?

5. When you play a game in which you control a particular character, have you ever felt a time where you and the character you control are one and the same?

   a. If you feel that has happened at times, could you give me a particular instance?

   b. Can you describe to me the experience when that barrier of separation between you and the character vanishes? Would it be alright for me to say that you really like such games?

   c. How do you then go about designing your avatar in game keeping all these feelings in mind?

6. Tell me a bit about what games you are playing currently and on what devices do you play them?

   a. Is there a specific sort of affinity you have developed with a game and a device you're playing on?

b. How do you maintain the devices you play games on, have you customized them, upgraded them, improved them with enhancements, so on and so forth?

7. Now moving on to the games you play, can you tell me in detail the entire process about how you decide what particular game you will play?

a. So, where do you get the information for new games you must play about

b. Does feedback of friends and fellow gamers influence your selection process in anyway?

c. With YouTube and dedicated video game sites and gamer forums in existence today is there anything you regularly follow for your video game information?

8. Speaking of friends do you have a network of friends who are gamers with whom you share video games, game experiences, game strategies, information and other such details?

a. How important do you think it is to have a group of friends who are fellow gamers?

b. Do you feel it enriches your gaming experiences in anyway?

9.   If we are to consider the term *gamer*, what are your opinions about the term?

f. What do you think are the qualities/attributes one must have in order to be called a gamer?

g. Would you call yourself a *gamer?*

h. Is there a gamer you look up to, someone you would consider an ideal gamer? Describe your concept of an ideal gamer.

i. What do you think makes him/her ideal?

j. At some stage would you like to emulate your ideal?

10. Finally, looking at video games as a practice,

a. Have you ever thought about the role that rules play in video games, how important do you think it is to get a hang of the rules in a particular video game?

b. So, looking back at rules again do you think rules are limitations in games or they are challenges for you in specific scenarios

c. Have you ever felt a time where you used the rules and limitations of a game to your advantage?

A Glossary of Gaming Terminology

1. Aimbot/Auto-aim: A hack/program generally used in shooter games that allows for players to take 100 per-cent accurate headshots every time.

2. Achievements: A way to reward players for succeeding in clearing a select set of obstacles in games. The goals are sometimes essential to finishing the game while sometimes players are incentivized for just pushing the ludic barriers in creative/ingenious ways. Achievements is the incentive program on Microsoft's Xbox on Sony's PlayStation they are called Trophies.

3. Alpha: The first stage in the game-development cycle. The developers use alpha builds to check the limits of the worlds built. Often in-complete and unfinished Alpha footage is however used in promotional material to create a pre-launch buzz.

4. Assist: A term used in games and sports as a way to setup someone else to finish a move. For instance, in shooter games leaving someone in a prime position to kill an opponent, in football laying the ball for a goal to be scored.

5. Avatar: The virtual representation of the player in-game. Avatars are often highly customizable and allow for players to use them as key markers for establishing, expressing and showcasing their identities.

6. Beta: A key stage of the video game development cycle and succeeds the Alpha stage. The game in the Beta is further refined than Alpha and still has a lot of bugs and glitches. However, it is in the Beta phase that developers trial games among the player community for feedback.

7. Camping: A widely hated but effective strategy where players search for an ideal spot (inconspicuous with high visibility) to lie in wait and ambush clueless opponents.

8. Campaign: The ludic journey a player must finish in-order to reach the end of the narrative that video games offer. The key component of single player games

9. Carry: A support role in team-based games where a player literally carries the team. The role of the carry requires for sacrifices in self-farming and damage opponents willing to farm in early game scenarios. By doing this the carry distracts the opponents and allows his/her teammates to farm. Late game the carry is much weaker but his/her roles is inconsequential then, as the farmed characters will get the win.

10. Checkpoint: A key component of single player games, is often allocation where a player must reach in order to save in-game progress. Also, a safe point from which a player re-spawns each time they die.

11. Cut-scenes: Cinematic elements of video games that players unlock by progressing in the story campaigns. Cut-scenes can be either interactive or traditional movie clips but are often one of the developers' key way to shape the narrative.

12. Death-match: A simple game format where the team with the highest kills wins. A popular Player vs Player and Multiplayer trend.

13. Die and Retry: A game format in which a player is expected to doe often and keep re-trying. An ideal game format for the slasher category of players. Popular titles include *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne*.

14. DLC: Extra content for video games pushed online and often costs over and above the cost of the normal game. Can include a wide variety of content ranging from cosmetic changes to extra playable content.

15. DRM: Short for Digital Rights Management is the term that encompasses all anti-tamper and anti-piracy steps that developers take to prevent easy cracking and piracy of games.

16. Easter Egg: A surprising, at times funny in-game occurrence that must be searched for. Often a great find for explorers!

17. Exploit: A glitch in the game that is used by players to their benefit.

18. Farming: The repeated completion of specific tasks, objectives in-game in order to level-up/power-up characters.

19. Feeding: The opposite of farming when players die easily allowing opponents to farm-up. Often caused when players are novice or intentional trolls.

20. FPS: First Person Shooter games where the player gets a point of view from the avatar's gun. Making it seem like the gun is being held by the player.

21. F2P: Games which are free to play

22. God Mode: a mode in the game often reached by a cheat that imbues the player with special powers (often making the character invincible) that break the game.

23. Grinding: A way to farm but involves a lot of repeated clearing of lower levels/ killing of easier opponents which cumulatively lead in a farming-up.

24. Hackers: People who use hacks and cheats in-game breaking the rules and the game in the process.

25. Headshot: The easiest way to kill/cause damage in a shooter game. A bullet shot precisely on the head.

26. Indie: Games developed by an independent studio, similar to Indie films.

27. MMR: Match Making Ranking is a player's score that defines his/her playing level. The higher the MMR the more experienced and proficient the player can also be compared to Elo rating or ranking systems

28. MOBA: A multiplayer game format where players combine to fight in teams. *DoTA* was one of the earliest in the format and now newer gas include *LoL*, *Smyte* etc.

29. Nerf: Often a consequence of an update reduces the effectiveness of a weapon or a character or a class of in-game characteristics.

30. NPC: Non-Player Character, any character that is controlled by the game's AI.

31. OP: Overpowered, a phrase used to describe any in-game act that works with incredible amounts of success, causing players to resort to using it as frequently as possible.

32. Quickscope: A shooter game player skill that involves players looking into a sniper rifle's scope and taking an accurate shot with minimal time delay during aiming.

33. Rage Quit: A player act which involves a player leaving an instance of play in the midst of the game. Generally, happens when things are not going the player's way.

34. Respawn: The re-creation/re-birth of an in-game character after it is destroyed.

35. Side Quest: Most single player games have smaller missions that are not key to the completion of the campaign but completing them earns the players valuable experience and rewards. Side-questing (completion of all possible side-missions)

then becomes an effective way to learn the game and farm often ensuring that the players' characters are overpowered in the end game scenario.

36. Tank: Characters in-game with high hit points and resistant to damage. A tank is best used after being thoroughly fared as it then can absorb a lot of damage and deal high damage as well.

37. Walling/Wall-hack: A hack that allows for players to see the position of all players, even through solid objects. The use of a wall hack is difficult to detect, but it makes elements of shooter games such as cover, ambush irrelevant.

38. XP: Experience Points often a way to quantify a player's in-game achievements, the accumulation of a certain number of them causes players to level-up. The higher the level the higher the amount of XP required for the next level.

Annexure 3

A list of games from the Study

Conventional Platforms

Name of the Game	Publisher	Genre of game	Description
Assassins Creed 2	Ubisoft Montreal	Single player Action with Free to Roam and open worlds	Historical Drama set in Florence, Italy with parkour and stealth domination
Assassins Creed Brotherhood	Ubisoft Montreal	Single player Action with Free to Roam and open worlds	Historical Drama set in Rome, Italy with parkour and stealth domination
Assassins Creed Black Flag	Ubisoft Montreal	Single player Action with Free to Roam and open worlds	Historical Drama set in the Caribbean with parkour and stealth domination. Focusing on the pirate life introduces naval battles.
Assassins Creed Unity	Ubisoft Montreal	Single player Action with Free to Roam and open worlds	Historical Drama set in France with parkour and stealth domination. Set in the backdrop of the French Revolution.
Assassins Creed Syndicate	Ubisoft Montreal	Single player Action with Free to Roam and open worlds	Historical Drama set in England with parkour and stealth domination. Set in post-Industrial age England.
Batman Arkham City	WB Games	Single player Action with Free to Roam and open world	A Batman adventure set in one night. Requires the player to overcome a variety of challenges to save Gotham City.

Batman Arkham Origins	WB Games	Single player Action with Free to Roam and open world	A Batman adventure set in one night. Requires the player to overcome a variety of challenges to save Gotham City. Much younger Batman seeking credibility in Gotham.
Batman Arkham Knight	WB Games	Single player Action with Free to Roam and open world	A Batman adventure set in one night. Requires the player to overcome a variety of challenges to save Gotham City. Set in the backdrop of the death of the Joker.
Battlefield 4	Electronic Arts	Single and Multiplayer FPS game	Popular shooter game with futuristic weapons and warfare technology.
Battlefield Hardline	Electronic Arts	Single and Multiplayer FPS game	A FPS game that focuses on players being part of a SWAT team rewards for players for subduing enemies rather than shooting or killing them
Call of Duty: Black Ops 2	Activision Blizzard	Single and Multiplayer FPS game	Popular shooter game with futuristic weapons and warfare technology. Has a unique time spit between 1970s and 2022
Call of Duty: Black Ops 3	Activision Blizzard	Single and Multiplayer FPS game	Popular shooter game with futuristic weapons and warfare technology. Provides a wide range of augmentations using a neural implant
Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare	Activision Blizzard	Single and Multiplayer FPS game	Popular shooter game with futuristic weapons and warfare technology. Has exosuits and cybernetic prosthetics.
Crysis 3	Electronic Arts	Single player Third Person Shooter	Popular shooter game with futuristic weapons and warfare technology. Has the use of nanosuits that provide a variety of anatomical augmentations.

Destiny	Activision Blizzard	Multiplayer only FPS	A popular Online FPS set in space with futuristic weapons and gear.
Devil May Cry 4	Capcom	Single Player Hack and Slash	An action adventure hack and slash which focuses on a player's ability to combine attacks and react swiftly.
Don Bradman Cricket 2014	Tru Blu Entertainment	Single and Multiplayer cricket Simulator	A game franchise that attempts to accurately re-create global cricket. But owing to rights issues relies a lot on the player base for accurate squad rosters and newer players.
DoTA2	Valve	Multiplayer MOBA	A free-to-play multiplayer online battle arena video game that needs for players to capture enemy towers and bases for victory.
Dragon Age Inquisition	Electronic Arts	Single Player RPG	RPG game with a variety of classes and races massively open world a campaign that lasts over 100 hours long.
Driveclub	Sony Interactive	Single and Multiplayer Racer Game	Sony's exclusive racing game for the PlayStation franchise focuses on racing and team-based events.
Everybody's gone to the rapture	The Chinese Room	Single Player Indie game	A first-person adventure art video game with a suspense thriller narrative.
FarCry 4	Ubisoft Montreal	Single player shooter RPG	A first-person Shooter game with strong RPG elements part of a franchise often set in jungles and wildlands.
Fallout 4	Bethesda	Action RPG	An action RPG set in a post nuclear apocalyptic world.

FIFA 2015	Electronic Arts	Single and Multi-Player Football Simulator	An annual game franchise that attempts to accurately re-create global professional Football.
FIFA 2016	Electronic Arts	Single and Multi-Player Football Simulator	An annual game franchise that attempts to accurately re-create global professional Football.
Firewatch	Campo Santo	Single Player Indie	A first person mystery adventure game set in the forest reserves in the US.
Flower	Sony Interactive	Single Player Indie game	A PlayStation exclusive flow based game with stunning visuals.
Forza Horizon 2	Microsoft Studios	Single and Multiplayer Racer Game	A Microsoft exclusive racer franchise that prides itself on its accuracy of reproducing cars' performances and the driving experience it provides.
Forza Motorsport 6	Microsoft Studios	Single and Multiplayer Racer Game	A Microsoft exclusive racer franchise that prides itself on its accuracy of reproducing cars' performances and the driving experience it provides.
Forza Horizon 3	Microsoft Studios	Single and Multiplayer Racer Game	A Microsoft exclusive racer franchise that prides itself on its accuracy of reproducing cars' performances and the driving experience it provides.
Grand Theft Auto V	Rockstar games	Single player action-adventure	Part of the popular GTA franchise a game set in the fictional city of Los Santos needs players to play through a variety of missions and heists.
Guild Wars 2	Arenanet	MMORPG	A one-time paid MMORPG with a number of expansions and immensely large world.

Halo Masterchief Collection	Microsoft Studios	Single and Multiplayer FPS	Microsoft's flagship shooter game set in the future with intergalactic warfare
Halo V	Microsoft Studios	Single and Multiplayer FPS	Microsoft's flagship shooter game set in the future with intergalactic warfare
Infamous Second Son	Sony Interactive	Single player Action with Free to Roam and open world	A PlayStation exclusive about super-powered humans and their abilities. Set in a world where the super-mans are captured and need to be saved.
Injustice Gods Among Us	WB Games	Single, Two and multiplayer action game	A game with characters from the DC Universe that allows for players to combat with and against each other.
Journey	Sony Interactive	Single Player Indie Game	A PlayStation exclusive flow based game with stunning visuals.
Just Cause 3	Square Enix	Single player Action RPG	A game with abnormal laws of physics that deals with need for a revolution in an imaginary Latin-American country.
Kill Zone Shadow Fall	Guerilla Games	Single and Multiplayer FPS	A PlayStation exclusive about inter-species alien warfare on a planet called Vekta.
League of Legends	Riot Games	Multiplayer MOBA	An online multiplayer battlefield arena similar to DoTA2.
Mad Max	Avalanche Studios	Single Player Action RPG	A game based on the Mad Max franchise of movies set in the wasteland and relies heavily on scrap collection and repurposing.

Mortal Kombat	NetherRealm Studios	Single, Two and multiplayer action game	A combat-based video game where players can choose a variety of characters with special abilities to fight with.
Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor	WB Games	Single Player Action RPG	A game set in JRR Tolkien's world is however dealing with a story not dealt in the books. Has a unique combat and nemesis system.
Metal Gear Solid V	Konami	Single Player Action RPG	A Japanese game that is part of the popular MGS cross-platform franchise.
NBA 2k 15	2K	Single and Multi-Player Football Simulator	An annual game franchise that attempts to accurately re-create American professional Basketball
Need for Speed: Rivals	Electronic Arts	Single and Multiplayer Racer Game	Electronic Arts' cross-platform racer that allows for players to customize cars and take part in races involving pursuits and combat gear.
Need for Speed 2016	Electronic Arts	Single and Multiplayer Racer Game	Electronic Arts' cross-platform racer that allows for players to customize cars and take part in races involving pursuits. A game very close to the fast and furious franchise of films.
Rise of the Tomb Raider	Square Enix	Third Person shooter	A part of the Tomb raider reboot franchise, archaeologist in search of lost treasure. Was a limited time exclusive on Xbox
Star Wars Battlefront	Electronic Arts	Multiplayer FPS and TPS	Online shooter games based on the Star Wars universe.

The Last of us	Sony Interactive	TPS shooter action	A PlayStation exclusive set in a world with zombies where players are expected to survive.
Tom Clancy Splinter Cell Blacklist	Ubisoft Toronto	TPS shooter	A unique shooter game that encourages a super stealth approach, allows players to interact with lights and move in the dark.
Tom Clancy's The Division	Ubisoft	TPS shooter online	An online only third person shooter game. Set in Manhattan and with destructive environments the game gives the players a high exploration potential.
Tomb Raider	Square Enix	Third Person shooter	A game set in the Indian Jones mould, is a reboot of the classic series as the game escapes from its Angelina Jolie trappings.
Uncharted 4	Sony Interactive	TPS Shooter action	Part of the Uncharted franchise, is exclusive to PlayStation and each title is in the search for lost mythical treasure.
Witness	Thekla Inc.	A 3d puzzle adventure	A large puzzle world set on a picturesque island. Players expected to solve puzzles to explore further.
Witcher 3	CDProjekt Red	Action RPG	The third game in the Witcher franchise massively detailed worlds with a huge amount of backstory. Game close to 200 hours long.
WoW	Activision	MMORPG	Based in Azeroth a world full of magical creatures. An immensely large world with very rich lore. Monthly subscription required.

Name of the Game	Developer	Genre of game	Description
XCOM 2	Firaxis Games	A turn based tactics game	Human vs Aliens in order to prevent alien invasion. It is a turn based tactics game where each decision matters.

Mobile Games

Name of the Game	Developer	Genre of game	Description
Angry Birds 2	Rovio	F2P puzzle based game	Projectile based puzzles to be cleared in limited number of tries. The fewer number of chances better the rewards.
Angry Birds Transformers	Rovio	F2P arcade shooter	A game where transformer bots merge with angry birds each with a different set of weapons to clear levels.
Asphalt 7	Gameloft	F2P racer	Gameloft's racer game with a variety of accurate cars and amazing effects of lights.
Asphalt 8: Airborne	Gameloft	F2P racer	Gameloft's racer which focuses on the cars being airborne and jumping off ramps.
Candy Crush	King	F2P match making game	One of the most popular games where players swap a variety of sweets in rows and columns to clear levels.
Chain Reaction	Buddy-Matt Entertainment	F2P turn based strategy	A game which can support up to 8 players where players set and activate particles o capture the board.

Clash of Clans	Supercell	F2P RPG	A game where players have their own kingdoms and spend time expanding and fortifying them as they level up. They must attack and defend their territories a few times a day.
Clash Royale	Supercell	F2P PVP MOBA	A game where players collect cards with powers and compile a deck. They use the deck to combat other players. Each card has a cost and the game's elixir system decides when a player can play the card.
Cut the Rope	Zeptolab	F2P Puzzle	A game where a hungry creature must be fed candy. The challenges require a variety of ingenious solutions and a high level of observation
Deck Heroes	IGG.com	F2P Strategy	A game where players collect cards and then compile them in decks in order to form the strongest decks to take on other players. The game requires players to combine just the right cards for the best resultant combinations.
Diner Dash	Glu	F2P simulator	A game that simulates a diner where the player must fulfil the orders of the customers.
Diner Restaurant	Grupo Alamar	Paid simulator	A game that simulates a diner where the player must fulfil the orders of the customers.
Dumb ways to Die	Metro Trains	F2P Challenge Variety based arcade	A game with a variety of funny scenarios that ensures players are aware of the minimum safety measures. Has a large number of challenges that

			players are expected to switch to instantaneously.
Dumb ways to Die 2	Metro Trains	F2P Challenge Variety based arcade	A game with a variety of funny scenarios that ensures players are aware of the minimum safety measures. Has a large number of challenges that players are expected to switch to instantaneously.
Fruit Ninja	Halfbrick Studios	F2p touch based Hack and Slash	A game where players are expected to slash fruits and avoid other dangerous things at a relatively high speed.
Gods of Rome	Gameloft	F2P Combat	A game where players control mythical characters from folklore in a one on one combat style.
Jetpack Joyride	Halfbrick Studios	F2P action	A game where a player must cross levels on a jetpack and avoid obstacles and enemies.
Marvel Future Fight	Netmarble games	F2P strategy	A game where players get to combine characters from the marvel universe into teams and then fight other teams
Mini Militia	Appsomniacs LLC	MOBA on mobile	A game where players team up and use a variety of weapons in a 2-dimensional world to blow each other up. No teams as players can kill every other player.
Modern Combat 5	Gameloft	F2P FPS	A popular mobile shooter set in the future.

Restaurant Mania	Happy Mobile Game	Paid Simualtor	A game that simulates a diner where the player must fulfil the orders of the customers.
Real Racing 3	Electronic Arts	F2P racer	Electronic Arts racer with a variety of cars and racetracks. Focuses on clean driving and no stunts, customizations.
Score Hero	First Touch	F2P touch based football puzzles.	A football simulator where players must combine the right moves to make the right play in order to level-up.
Shadow Fighter 2	Nekki	F2P action RPG	A game where a player must control a shadow and use a variety of weapons to reach the end.
Subway Surfers	Kiloo	F2P Arcade	An endless runner where a player must surf through different scenarios and avoid obstacles.
Temple Run 2	Imangi Studios	F2P Arcade	Flagship endless runner where a player must avoid obstacles and harmful creatures. Speed and difficulty increases with distance.

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Digital Play in Everyday Life: The Ludic Practices of Indian Gamers

by Aditya Deshbandhu

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