Youth, gaming, and the network society: Exploring the agentic potential of gameplay in Minecraft

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the agentic potential of gaming practices for young people. Manuel Castells’ (1996) theory of the network society helps to illuminate how online games typify the logic of neoliberal capitalism in the ways games are produced, marketed, and consumed. But games also exemplify the meaningful forms of bottom-up participatory practices enabled by the current socioeconomic and sociotechnical conditions that underlie the network society. Using Minecraft as the site of inquiry, the thesis takes a critical ethnographic approach to a case study to describe and analyze how and for what purpose young people take up gaming. It concludes by arguing that even the everyday forms of gaming practices have the potential to be agentic by enabling young people to take up meaningful practices and competencies in relation to identity, gender, learning, and sociality, despite the capitalist logic that heavily shapes young people’s media landscape.

Keywords: Online games; gaming; Minecraft; youth; participatory culture; network society; agency; case study
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whose sacrifice and love made this possible. 
&  
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who taught me the value of a good game.
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1. Introduction

I have a longstanding relationship with video games that has ranged from boredom to curiosity, distraction to entertainment. As a child, many evenings were spent observing the neighbourhood boys playing games like Street Fighter, while I sat idly by hoping that eventually they would let me play. Later as an adult, I similarly spent evenings watching my partner playing computer games as I curiously observed, frightfully yelped, and animatedly moved in response to the game’s realistic graphics and suspenseful narratives. Not much had changed over those years of watching people game. I was equally curious by what made gaming so fun. It was not until just a few years ago that I decided to give it a shot for myself. My partner had mentioned a game that he described to me as having “no real goal other than to build by moving blocks”. Intrigued and curious, I began playing. Approximately four hours later, bleary-eyed and exhausted, I had created an elaborate beachfront mansion made of wood, cobblestone, and iron. During those four hours, I had mastered the mechanics of the game, gained a comprehensive knowledge of its resources and tools, and ended with a sense of accomplishment in what I was capable of doing. As a self-professed non-gamer-but-fan-of-games, this experience has stayed with me to this day. The hours spent, the energy committed, and the goals accomplished revealed that gaming is much more than just play. Too often public discourse on gaming centres on issues such as violence, addiction, and social and cognitive developmental problems without adequately recognizing the meaningful experiences that can take place through gaming. But my own first-hand account of gaming has enabled me to experience the various implicit and explicit ways in which gaming can be meaningful. As such, this thesis serves as an academic exploration of what I experienced that evening: to understand what it is about gaming that makes it such a robust environment for learning, creating, and having fun.

While video games have become a prominent part of contemporary popular culture for young people, the reality is that the contemporary youth media landscape is increasingly shaped by the demands of capital, especially now that neoliberal capitalism
has intensified the experience and impact of consumer culture. The shift towards a ‘network society’ (Castells, 1996/2010) in which networks operate as the primary means of social, economic, and political configuration has had significant implications on socioeconomic and sociotechnical environments that shape young people’s mediated lives. The demands of post-Fordist capitalism require firms to invest in aggressive marketing strategies and with the rise of media convergence, marketers are targeting young people in increasingly pervasive ways. Games serve as a fitting point of analysis: Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter (2003) describe them as the ‘ideal commodity’ of post-Fordist capitalism to suggest how games best represent the conditions of the network society. This is accomplished through a myriad of ways such as strict intellectual property rights that favour the rights of firms over players (Benkler, 2006; Kline et al., 1993), the exploitation of players’ contributions for marketing and research (Zwick et al., 2008), and the co-optation of online spaces that blurs the boundaries between content and advertisement (Grimes & Shade, 2005; Montgomery, 2012). As such, authors such as Kline et al. argue that discourses about the emancipatory potential of gaming must be met with scepticism: the structural effects of capital on online games lead to a new governmentality wherein players will always be situated as consumers over anything else.

Despite these seemingly oppressive conditions, it is also the case that online games have become an important way for young people to socialize and have fun, with some even arguing that it has become the “lingua franca for participation in the digital age” (Ito & Bittanti, 2010, p. 240). The rise of digital media such as computers, smartphones, and social networking sites have ushered in an era of participatory culture that fosters bottom-up forms of production, and games have provided a particularly valuable means for this to take place. Gaming is not just about playing a game. It also includes complex and sophisticated media practices: mobilizing collective intelligence (McConigal, 2008), developing a comprehensive understanding of media convergence (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003; Jenkins, 2006a), taking part in informal learning practices (Gee, 2003, 2007), forming identities (Gee, 2003; Ito & Bittanti, 2010), and taking up gaming in various ways to fulfill different needs (Ito & Bittanti, 2010). These kinds of practices illustrate that young people, as players and consumers, are also active participants in the construction of their own culture, identities, and lifeworlds. Indeed,
online games and virtual worlds may increasingly be subsumed under the logic of capitalism, but the meaningful experiences and competencies that young people demonstrate and gain through gaming reveal the potential of participatory cultures to enable a sense of agency among young people. Not all gaming is necessarily going to lead to emancipatory experiences, but what I want to stress is the potential for agentic practices can take place within the structure of post-Fordist capitalism.

To explore this structure versus agency debate, I turn to an online game called Minecraft as my site of inquiry. Minecraft was originally created in 2009 by a Swedish indie game developer, Markus ‘Notch’ Perrson. He first privately shared Minecraft on a TigSource forum\(^1\) with other members as a downloadable alpha version. Eventually, the game’s popularity in the forum led to the release of a beta version in December 2010 that allowed people to purchase the game with the recognition that the game was not yet complete but that updates would happen over time (Timeline of events – Minecraft Wiki, 2010). The full version of the game was released in November 2011 (Timeline of Events – Minecraft Wiki, 2010). The game costs approximately $27USD (at time of writing) to download, and has also been made available on XBOX and for smartphones. To date, over 7.5 million people have bought the game and the game has been given multiple awards. It was awarded the 2010 Indie of the Year award as chosen by Mod DB voters. And at the 2011 Game Developers Choice Awards, it was awarded the Best Debut Game, Best Downloadable Game, and Most Innovative Game (Minecraft – Wikipedia, 2012). The success of Minecraft allowed Perrson to start his own game development company, Mojang.

Minecraft is a sandbox\(^2\) game that offers an environment and basic tools for players to gather resources and create their own world. The game has a rather crude

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\(^1\) TIGSource (or ‘The Independent Game Source’) is a website dedicated to independent gamers and developers.

\(^2\) Sandbox is a type of gaming genre that is characterized by an open-ended, non-linear type of game that enables players to select their own path in the game, generating a narrative that is unique to that player. Common examples of sandbox games are The Sims and Grand Theft Auto.
aesthetic reminiscent of early 90’s games, but the design is complex, allowing for sophisticated forms of player engagement. The world is made up of 3D pixelated blocks of different colours to represent different materials like leaves, cobblestone, coal, etc. The maps are self-generated as the player navigates the world comprised of multiple terrains like oceans and caves, and biomes that include mountains, forests, marshes, jungles, and deserts. The game can be played as a free web browser version, referred to as “Classic Minecraft”, but this version is very limited in terms of what players can do. They cannot use mods, skins, or player-generated maps and they cannot save their progress. On the other hand, the paid, downloadable version is much more flexible. It offers two modes: Survival and Creative. In Survival mode, players must battle the elements by gathering basic resources, crafting tools, and protecting themselves against hostile monsters that come out at night. Players must maintain their health and hunger to survive and so it is essential that they are efficient and strategic. In Creative mode, players are given an unlimited number of resources and ready-made tools to be able to create anything they choose. Player creativity ranges from building original architecture to creating replicas of real life structures, to designing roller coasters to building traps against monsters. They can also play in single player or multiplayer in each mode. Multiplayer can be played either through public servers hosted by other players, or in private servers where access is restricted to those with permission.

The purpose of this study is to focus on bottom-up forms of participatory practices that are enabled by Minecraft through a critical ethnographic approach to a case study. Kline et al.’s (2003) work offers a textual analysis into understanding how the capitalist paradigm shapes the terms of participation through an examination of how the gaming industry and specific types of games create particular subjectivities that situate players as nothing more than consumers. Their work is useful for understanding the broader issues of neoliberal capitalism in relation to young people’s media lives, but is by no means exhaustive in understanding the agentic potential of gaming through the meaningful forms of participation that can emerge. This study aims to expand on that work by offering an ethnographic perspective into understanding the lived experiences and meaningful practices that players themselves are taking up within the structures that Kline et al. describe. To simply dismiss what young people are doing through gaming would ignore any of the meaningful experiences and important competencies they
acquire—competencies that can sometimes be applied in other contexts outside of gaming. Likewise, to ignore the effects of the capitalist paradigm on the media landscape would fail to recognize the larger conditions that shape what young people are doing within that landscape. Thus this study aims to provide additional insight through an ethnographic approach into understanding the complex relationships between young people, neoliberal capitalism, and participation.

I use Ito and Bittanti’s (2010) descriptive framework of ‘genres of gaming’ to identify and interpret how and for what purpose my participants take up gaming. From there, I explore how genres of gaming enable complicated forms of agency. To do this, I seek to answer the following questions:

1. What kinds of meaningful practices do the creative affordances in Minecraft enable?
2. How does gameplay in Minecraft enable young people to assert their agency in the context of a neoliberal network society?

Ultimately, my goal is to understand how gaming can afford powerful and robust opportunities for young people to engage in participatory culture in meaningful ways. As such, this study seeks to understand how games are shaped by the logic of capitalism, as well as to analyze how young people are taking up gaming practices in their everyday lives within the neoliberal capitalist structure. These goals are largely motivated by the desire to avoid reducing what young people do with and through gaming to a form of consumerism, but to identify and illuminate how gaming can enable meaningful, complicated forms of agency.

In the following chapter, I discuss the theoretical frameworks that ground this study. I begin with an analysis of the socioeconomic and sociotechnical implications of the postindustrial paradigm shift towards a network society, especially within the context of the game industry. Then I move into a discussion of the rise of participatory cultures; that is, how young people are adopting new forms of participation enabled by the shift towards the network society. I outline the genres of gaming to illustrate the diverse ways in which gaming is taken up. I also discuss the various ways in which gaming enables meaningful practices in relation to learning, collective intelligence, and identity work. Chapter 3 details the critical ethnographic approach I adopted as part of my case study,
including the methods I used to collect and analyze data. The structure and agency dichotomy represents the power relations between firms and consumers and critical ethnography’s inherent political dimension enables me to address this debate in a more nuanced way. This chapter also provides a rationale for why Minecraft serves as a fitting site of inquiry for this study. Chapter 4 describes and analyzes the findings from my research. I primarily use the genres of gaming as an interpretive framework for identifying and understanding what kinds of gaming practices my participants took up. In addition, I discuss the agentic possibilities that emerge through the genres of gaming in relation to sociality, identity work, collaboration, and learning.
2. Unpacking the Participation Paradox of Games: Understanding the Structure/Agency Debate

2.1. Introduction

In the following chapter, I outline the tensions between the structure of neoliberal capitalism and the agency of young consumers in order to understand the role of consumer culture and participatory culture in young people’s everyday lives. Gaming is a fitting point of analysis for understanding this tension because gaming is both an ‘ideal commodity’ of post-Fordist, consumer culture (Kline et al., 2003) and the ‘lingua franca’ of participatory culture (Ito & Bittanti, 2010). On the one hand, games typify the logic of neoliberal capitalism by the ways in which they are produced, marketed, and consumed, but on the other hand, games also exemplify the new forms of participatory culture enabled by the current socioeconomic and sociotechnical paradigms that underlie contemporary society. To explain this tension in relation to games, I use Castells’ (1996/2010) thesis of the ‘network society’ in the context of the games’ industry to describe and analyze how the role of networks has reorganized social, political, and economic life. The network society thesis helps to explain the intensification of a consumer culture ushered in by immersive advertising strategies and invasive market research required in the post-Fordist economy. I also largely rely on the work of Kline et al. (2003) and Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) to understand how games in particular serve as the paradigmatic media form for understanding how global capitalism has come to shape the production of social life. Following that, drawing on the work of Ito et al. (2010), Jenkins (2006a) and Benkler (2006), I provide an analysis of how gaming can enable meaningful practices for young people by offering tools and spaces to collaborate, learn, play, and construct identities. Ito and Bittanti’s (2010) interpretive framework of gaming genres outlines various gaming practices to illustrate the affordances of gaming that enable players to assert their agency by taking up gaming in
ways that best suit their goals and needs. As such, despite an intense consumer culture that pervades young people’s media lives, online games can offer the potential for meaningful practices that enrich the everyday lives of young people. It is this tension that largely frames this thesis.

2.2. The Network Society

The contemporary media landscape that characterizes the global North has largely been shaped by what many researchers identify as a post-industrial paradigm shift towards media practices that are much more decentralized and individualized than in the past. This shift is conceptualized as a turn towards a “network society” (Castells, 1996/2010) that reorganizes social, political, and economic life into networks “as the basic form of human organization and relationship” (Barney, 2004, p. 25). Networks are comprised of nodes that are interconnected by flows (of information, capital, ideas, people, symbols, etc.). This organizational structure can be applied to numerous arenas of the network society: from the increasing growth of multinational corporations to the transnational flow of capital, from the emergence of online, virtual communities to the spread of current events across the world. These processes and practices are facilitated by digital, network technologies that function as the basic infrastructure for how networks are established and maintained. The unique characteristics of these technologies, compared to those of the industrial era or older forms of mass media, have made it particularly useful in its application to the demands of networks.

Kline et al. (2003) argue that interactive games are the ideal commodity in post-Fordist and promotional capitalism that characterize the network society. By ‘ideal commodity’, they mean that games embody “the most powerful economic, technological, social, and cultural forces at work in [the post-Fordist capitalist] regime” (p. 74). In a related argument, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) argue that games are a “paradigmatic media of Empire—planetary, militarized hypercapitalism” (p. xv) to describe how online games exemplify the cultural, economic, and political forces that characterize global capitalism. Gaming is a fitting point of analysis for understanding the social, political, and economic implications of the paradigm shift towards the network society on everyday life because, like network societies more generally, online games
increasingly rely on immaterial and affective labour, the manipulation and exploitation of interactivity for profit accumulation, highly immersive marketing strategies, and the perpetuation of corporate power over consumer rights by way of copyright regulation. By examining games in this context, my goal is illustrate the top-down structural conditions of neoliberal capitalism and the way they shape the agency of young people as consumers and participants.

2.2.1. The New Economy

In the twentieth-century, advanced capitalist economies were largely based on Fordism as the foundational organizational structure that managed almost all arenas of society (Kline et al. 2003). Fordism was defined by Henry Ford’s industrial mass production strategies that were based on “deskilled monotonous work with increasingly high-levels of mechanization” (Kline et al., 2003, p. 62). Efficient and productive industrial manufacturing meant that firms needed to create a demand that would match the supply of goods that were rolling off the assembly lines. This was accomplished by valuing workers as consumers. To guarantee an adequate circulation of capital, firms paid workers relatively high wages in order to ensure they had enough purchasing power to consume the commodities being produced. Meanwhile, state regulation of economic activities through public spending and the establishment of the welfare state also facilitated in helping to stabilize the economy (Kline et al. 2003). This era also saw the emergence of a mass media made possible by new communication technologies such as radios and televisions, which were highly centralized around governments and corporate oligopolies (Castells, 2010). Only those few centralized sources with the power and resources to produce and send a message could do so and thus “the content and format of messages were tailored to the lowest common denominator” (Castells, 2010, p. 359). The implications of this were the homogenization of both audiences and content, which led to the emergence of a mass culture. This formation was pivotal in creating a “mediatized marketplace” that leveraged the commercial mass media “for circulating cultural discourses on the ‘way of life’ in a Fordist mass society” (Kline et al., 2003, p. 65). But by the late 1960s and 1970s, economic and social instability, including the rise of inflation rates, the over-saturation of markets, and increasing workers’ discontent, lead to the destabilization of Fordism. As Castells (2010) argues, the Fordist
The ‘regime of accumulation’\(^3\) was much too rigid to sustain itself and governments and firms needed to respond.

Economic reform that centred on flexibility proved to be the first step in responding to the unstable conditions of advanced industrialism. Flexible modes of production enabled by digital, network technologies and network connections have ushered in a new regime of accumulation: post-Fordism or post-industrialism. The post-Fordist regime places new demands on firms to rebuild their organizational infrastructure into networks, which Castells (2010) refers to as the “network enterprise”. This means that a firm’s economic inputs and outputs are mediated and organized by a “network of networks of economic nodes” (Barney, 2004, p. 84) that allow for decentralized and flexible forms of production that are still under strict centralized control through the affordances of digital, network technologies and the network logic.

The network enterprise is also ideal for the flexibility required to survive the perpetual innovations that are characteristic of the network economy. This is accomplished by “generating a ceaseless stream of new commodities with ever shortening product cycles and life spans” (Kline et al., 2003, p. 66), such as the development of a video game series like Call of Duty, that includes several games with slightly different narratives, including Call of Duty, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, and Call of Duty: Black Ops. The gameplay for every game in this series is virtually similar: first-person shooter with narratives and settings involving military and war. Despite the repetition in design and gameplay, and only marginal variation in narrative, the series has seen unprecedented success: the latest game, Call of Duty: Black Ops II generated revenues of more than $500 million (Bedigian, 2012). Perpetual innovation, such as the development of a game series model, allows firms a way to constantly reinvent and rejuvenate their products in order to keep up with the increasingly competitive market.

\(^3\) A term originating from the French Regulation School and is defined by “a set of economic, political, social, and cultural arrangements that walks the tightrope between these contradictory requirements, holding production and consumption in equilibrium” (Kline et al., 2003, p. 62).
and selective consumer base. It also emphasizes the growing dependence on knowledge workers like marketers, game designers, and software engineers who provide "non-material elements such as research, planning and design [that] come to constitute an ever larger share of the total value of output" (Kline et al., 2003, p. 67; quoting Morris-Suzuki). Perpetual innovation functions as a new strategy for firms to increase market share that has lead to changes in methods of production, as well as on consumption practices. The social and economic transitions described by this move toward post-Fordism are central to the network thesis because they describe how digital, network technologies, and network logics play a role in the circulation of capital and the production of social life.

This shift towards a post-Fordist regime is also largely based on a move towards a socioeconomic model that Castells (1996/2010) refers to as informationalism. This new economy is no longer solely motivated by resource extraction and industrial manufacturing, but instead, by the production, distribution, and application of information:

What characterizes the current technological revolution is not the centrality of knowledge and information, but the application of such knowledge and information to knowledge generation and information processing/communication devices, in a cumulative feedback loop between innovation and the uses of innovation. (Castells, 2010, p. 31)

While the Fordist economy relied on the production of largely standardized material goods, post-Fordism relies on the production of information and other forms of immaterial goods, such as knowledge and experiences. Manufacturing processes are still important to the sustainability of global markets in the network society, but instead of relying on industrial modes of production management, manufacturing has been informationalized through the mediation of networked information technologies. In the gaming industry, success depends on the production of knowledge and experience: playing an immersive, interactive game typifies the idea of commodified experience. Thus the role of knowledge workers like game designers is absolutely critical in the post-Fordist economy since a game’s mechanics, narrative, and gameplay are crucial in successfully creating a dynamic and engaging experience for its consumers. In other words, the game is not the commodity, but rather, the experience of playing the game is.
These changes brought forth by the network enterprise and informationalism “necessarily involves a change in the quality and nature of labor” that are important for understanding the relationship between the economic and social arenas in network societies (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 289). This new form of labour is referred to as immaterial labour, which Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) define as “the cognitive and affected aspects of the commodity produced and by the production processes characteristically involved” (p. 31). Immaterial labour has made possible “non-standard forms of employment” (Barney, 2004, p. 96) that are based on the discourse of “flexibility as a condition of security” (p. 101). These new forms of employment include: part-time and temporary work, self-employment and freelancing, and temporal and spatial dislocation of work (Barney, 2004). The radical deinstitutionalization and individualization of labour allows workers the flexibility and adaptability required in a post-Fordist regime. This is accomplished through the affordances of networks and network technologies that enable efficient management and control of production and distribution sites across multiple locations. It also facilitates the organization of firms into decentralized, horizontal networks of “project-oriented teams committed to ‘total quality’” (Barney, 2004, p. 85), as opposed to an assembly line in a factory. Often these new forms of employment are regarded as a liberation from the stiff, corporate world of the standard 9-to-5 jobs. Workers are no longer bound to the rigid schedules defined by their employers and can be part of a collaborative, creative work environment, further emphasizing the importance of the teamwork-based infrastructure of the network enterprise. But this sense of creative and personal freedom is an illusion.

For instance, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter’s (2009) analysis of Electronic Arts (EA) provides a compelling example of how the rhetoric of freedom and flexibility persists but in reality, workers are even more bound to corporate interests than ever before. While network technologies enable employees to work from remote locations, there is also an expectation for constant connectedness. Unpaid hours are routine and even an expected part of the job. Furthermore, the authors note that despite the prospect of innovation, creativity, and collaboration, “EA’s production facilities tend much more to a neo-Fordist, re-Taylorized disciplining of the cognitariat” (p. 58) through the implementation of strict timelines and specific aesthetic and design parameters. Only those who are “already advantageously placed in the labour market” (Barney, 2004, p.
Hardt and Negri (2000) describe three types of immaterial labour: informatization of industrial labour, symbolic and analytic labour, and affective labour that reflect the decentralized, deterritorialized, and interactive model of digital, networked technologies. First, the informatization of industrial labour describes a qualitative shift in manufacturing as a new emphasis on information, knowledge, and communication has lead to the treatment of production as a service (Hardt & Negri, 2000). In other words, the informatization of manufacturing does not displace industrial production but it is “closely integrated into and serves to reinforce [its] strength” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 286). The most significant change in industrial manufacturing is the role of communication between the production and consumption of manufactured goods. The process of Toyotism exemplifies this shift by inverting the Fordist model of production so that production begins in response to the demands of the market (Hardt & Negri, 2000). This has also created new global power relationships between the global North and South based on whether a nation can sustain various modes of production under the logic of informationalism. Certainly this is largely dependent on various elements such as access to digital, network technologies, participation in global networks, and political power in the global economy. Thus, as Hardt and Negri (2000) argue, “[t]he geographic differences in the global economy are not signs of the co-presence of different stages of development but lines of the new global hierarchy of production” (p. 288). Successful participation in the global economy necessitates a certain degree of participation in informationalism.

Analytic and symbolic labour centres on knowledge and creativity and requires a certain degree of proficiency with digital, network technologies. It involves “problem-solving, problem-identifying, and strategic brokering activities” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 291; quoting Reich) through the manipulation of signs and symbols that digital, network technologies run on. In other words, analytic and symbolic labour describes the technical knowledge and skill to meet the demands of an informational economy. This includes the production of information processing devices such as computers and software, as well as their application. Unlike other machines and technologies of industrialism, computers are flexible tools that can be applied to various economic, political, and social activities in
the network society, making it the “central tool” of post-Fordism (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 292).

Affective labour involves the “creation and manipulation of affect” such as pride, well-being, or fear (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 292). Drawing on Bourdieu, Kline et al. (2003) describe affective labourers as “cultural intermediaries” (p. 72) who manage consumer demand required to sustain perpetual innovation by shaping tastes, identities, and subjectivities. While the material commodity is often the end product to be consumed, the production of affect is used to give the commodity intrinsic value beyond the use-value of the object itself. This is accomplished through affective labour that includes the work of creative, knowledge-based labourers such as marketers who manipulate signs and narratives in various forms of marketing practices. The threat of market saturation requires firms to invest more in affective labour as a way to gain a competitive edge and differentiate their firm through the production of affect alongside the commodity itself. Furthermore, affective labour is closely tied to the establishment of physical or virtual social networks and communities in order to leverage the inherent need for social interaction with commodity consumption (Hardt & Negri, 2000).

What immaterial labour reveals is that the playful and creative energies of knowledge production are being subsumed by capital in the network economy, despite the potential for autonomy and flexibility. The making and playing of virtual games require the creative, technical, and affective ingenuity of immaterial labour, but the logic of post-Fordist capitalism redirects that ingenuity towards the demands of the market. In particular, the importance of affect in the network economy reveals the implications of immaterial labour on the cultural and social dimensions of the network society; that is, through the production and legitimation of particular subjectivities required by neoliberal capitalism (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s machine theory, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) argue that gaming operates as a system of various machines that produce subjectivities in different ways. In terms of their hardware and software, games are “technical machines” that enable human subjects to act on their environments. Games as technical machines are also part of larger “social machines” that interlink human subjects with technical machines, which include the “machine of corporations” to describe the top-down processes of game production that are driven by profit, and the “subversive, war machines” to describe the tensions
between corporations and the hacker, DIY culture of gaming. Human subjects, themselves, especially as hardcore gamers, are also positioned as “machinic subjects” through game design, marketing, and other elements whose time, skills, and interests are mobilized towards specific configurations of virtual play, including who gets to play and how they get to play. What the application of machine theory reveals is that gaming involves the interconnection of material, social, and technical components that reconfigure human subjects’ bodies, cognition, and affect. Games are one way in which the needs, desires, and abilities of subjects as producers and consumers are shaped to support the neoliberal logic of capitalism. Immaterial labour is, in this sense, not only linked to producing commodities; it illustrates how the logic of post-Fordist capitalism is deeply intertwined with the production of subjectivities as well.

2.2.2. Digital Networked Technologies

The features of digital, networked technologies make it particularly valuable in the network society in terms of its affordances for work and play. Games illustrate these features and illuminate the important role that technologies have on the network economy and social life. The characteristics of these technologies, and more specifically of games, can be leveraged for more democratic, participatory ends by fostering sociality, non-proprietary peer production, and greater autonomy. But at the same time, corporations can also leverage those characteristics to control and shape the terms of participation for profit accumulation. Thus digital, network technologies like games represent the complicated relationship between consumers and producers in the network society: the game industry must enable a certain amount of freedom for gamers to experiment and play, but ultimately their corporate interests are what define the parameters of that freedom.

The first important characteristic of digital, network technologies in the network society is their ability to transcend the limitations of time and space. In other words, these technologies mediate the transmission of information across great distances at outstanding speeds. Castells (2010) describes this reconceptualization as ‘space of flows’ and ‘timeless time’. The space of flows is an articulation of how communication and production predominantly take place within and through flows in a network that is material in a different way than mass media, and are not confined by physical
boundaries. On the other hand, timeless time is an expression of a “systemic perturbation” (Castells, 2010, p. 494) of linear, sequential notions of time. The latter is often bound to physical places whereas timeless time is more suited to the fragmented and fluid qualities of spaces of flows. Instead, “places exist primarily as points of origin and destination for flows, and so time is rendered into timelessness, and location is dissolved” (Barney, 2004, p. 62). One implication of these changes has to do with the deterritorialization of communication and exchange, which has a profound effect on the social, political, and economic conditions of the network society.

The second characteristic of digital, network technologies is decentralization. As Benkler (2006) notes, the capacity to make and communicate meaning is much more accessible in the network society than in the past. Digital, network technologies dismantle the older tradition of the one-to-many model that was characteristic of older, centralized communication media such as television and radio. The barriers of cost and technical ability to use these technologies have become relatively cheaper and easier so that the capacity to produce and distribute information is no longer limited to just those who have the means to do so:

> It is becoming feasible for users to cut and paste, “glom on,” to existing cultural materials; to implement their intuitions, tastes, and expressions through media that render them with newly acceptable degrees of technical quality, and to distribute them among others, both near and far. (Benkler, 2006, p. 296)

Digital, network technologies are particularly valuable because audiences (now also producers) can create and circulate information across networks without the same restrictions and gatekeepers as older, communication technologies. The networking logic is strengthened and sustained by technologies like gaming that offer a more decentralized space for communication and exchange.

Lastly, the characteristic of interactivity is what marks this new era of digital, network technologies as unique and powerful, creating the potential for more active participation in media consumption. While the characteristic of decentralization emphasizes the dismantling of older top-down models of production and exchange (to a certain extent) to a more horizontal diffusion of knowledge production, interactivity refers
to the actual potential of digital, network technologies to enable this diffusion (Castells 2010). In this sense, interactivity is understood not just as a means to mediate digital exchanges, but also the ability of users to customize the ways in which they receive and share information. This type of intervention also describes the capacity for users and audiences to produce and exchange information with far fewer barriers than has been the case in the past. However, the freedom that interactivity implies may also be an illusion since users are really given a prescribed set of choices that allow and disallow particular activities and behaviours (Kline et al., 2003). Thus interactivity can mean more control for the users, but also potentially more subtle forms of control for corporations.

The creative energies of players and gaming’s underlying hacker, DIY ethic makes games an ideal technology of the network society in terms of participatory cultures. The decentralization of production and distribution that games allow offers players the tools and spaces to be able to take up a range of creative and at times, subversive practices. Games have become not only a prominent activity amongst youth, but they have also become a meaningful and robust alternative social and collaborative space to real life. Since games are not bound by the same restrictions of time and space in offline worlds, young people can take up a myriad of practices such as sociality, learning, and collaboration with other like-minded peers (regardless of whether they are friends in real life or not). The playful experimentation and collaborative creativity in games is often attributed to its interactive qualities (Benkler, 2006). The ability to make choices in how a game is played, coupled with the decentralized practices of collaborating and exchanging ideas highlights the interactive participation required in gaming. Unlike older forms of mass media primarily characterized by a one-way exchange, gaming offers the opportunity for two-way, active engagement that encourages bottom-up forms of production (Benkler, 2006). Thus a ‘good’ game is not only about following the rules of a game, it is also about engaging in an immersive and social online environment.

Despite the seemingly democratic potential of gaming, this promise is complicated by the reality that corporations still have the power to control the mechanisms of production and circulation. They have become highly attuned to the participatory features of gaming and have in fact, nurtured them in order to create new markets, as well as shape the terms of participation. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter
(2009) link MMOs (massively multiplayer online games) to Foucault’s idea of ‘biopower’ to describe systems of control and discipline of bodies and “life itself” (p. 124). These systems refer to various regimes of power that regulate the bodies and lives of subjects through mechanisms ranging from labour to health institutions. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter apply biopower to games by arguing that despite discourses about active player participation, game corporations ultimately hold the power to manage life in and through the game world. Within the game, firms control virtual play through maps, characters, and narratives, while offline, they manage life by implementing mechanisms such as servers, system administrators, and fee-paying subscriptions (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). The surveillance and management of digital and corporeal life in gaming illustrates the scope in which biopower is exercised in increasingly pervasive ways. Thus the freedom that interactivity implies is complicated since the ability to make choices within a game is ultimately shaped and designed by game corporations who are motivated by profit accumulation. The interactive quality of games is nothing more than a set of prescribed choices made by the game designers to shape virtual play in ways that “comply or collude” the formation of a particular set of practices and ideas (Kline et al., 2003, p. 54). The precarious challenge with this is that the game industry must leverage the interactive, decentralized characteristics of games both to encourage experimentation and to regulate it within the boundaries set by the logic of post-Fordist capitalism. It is through these various mechanisms that game corporations exercise biopower by the way the game sets up play to organize, shape, and frame the life of the player. Thus, the system of exploitation and control that happens in global capitalism is not just in the workplace, but through technologies like gaming, it also takes place in the personal and social lives of its subjects (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Kline et al., 2003).

2.2.3. Consumer Culture

The intensification of a consumer culture delineates the increasingly pervasive role of capitalism in everyday life. Young people’s intimate relationships with media and the growing popularity of gaming specifically makes it an attractive opportunity for marketers to reach young consumers in more pervasive ways. The role of affective labourers, such as marketers, as cultural intermediaries suggests that the need to shape consumer tastes and subjectivities is an essential part of production in today’s economy.
Efficient and cost-effective modes of production within post-Fordism mean that firms must now reprioritize and focus on creating consumer demand. This is achieved through invasive and aggressive marketing strategies and exhaustive consumer research that shapes consumers’ needs and desires, which in turn helps to shape product development and innovation. The rise of an intense consumer culture reveals how pervasive and important marketing has become in today’s economy.

The strategy of market segmentation has given rise to niche markets that have enabled firms to reach consumers in more targeted ways. Consumers are segmented into niche markets based on “hard demographic indices, such as income, occupation, and residential location” and “softer variables such as consumer taste, social attitudes, psychology, and lifestyle” (Kline et al., 2003, p. 72). And in order to successfully segment markets based on these variables, firms must utilize invasive market research strategies. Data mining techniques and technologies, such as cookies and the requirement of profiles, have enabled firms to collect and interpret aggregate data like consumer preferences and browsing histories (Chung & Grimes, 2005). This enables firms to create products or services and marketing strategies that are tailored to target very specific markets in very specific ways.

Young people’s consumer culture has been furthered by the rise of a convergence culture that has been shaped by a convergence of old and new media to facilitate “the flow of content across multiple media platforms” (Jenkins, 2006a, p 2). The deregulation of media industries has only further facilitated convergence with increasing ease. One example is a marketing strategy referred to as the “three-screen viewing environment” whereby ad campaigns span across three different screens: the television, the Internet, and mobile devices (Montgomery, 2012, p. 634). This has fundamentally changed the relationship between consumers and corporations by enabling firms to reach consumers in ways that are quantitatively and qualitatively different than in the past:

...convergence represents a paradigm shift—a move from medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture. (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 254)
Young people are savvy media consumers who interact with various media in their everyday lives. Marketers leverage this by targeting young people across these various media platforms, often requiring them to engage with the flow of content in ways that blur the traditional distinctions between commercial and noncommercial content on online platforms.

These new strategies of immersive advertising are particularly disconcerting when it comes to young people, and it is this group that has arguably experienced the most intensive effects of consumer culture in their everyday lives. The rise of neoliberalism—brought on by the privatization and deregulation of media industries and corporations—has given them unprecedented power to reach young consumers in aggressive new ways, creating what Hoechsmann and Poyntz (2012) refer to as “cradle-to-grave consumers”. Online gaming seems to best support immersive marketing strategies due to the culture of convergence and profitability of the commodification of experience. A fitting example is NeoPets: an online game that allows its players to take care of a virtual pet while playing games, navigating the online world, and interacting with other players. The more time they spend on the site, the more points they accrue which can then be used to purchase virtual goods. Often brands and products that are targeted in traditional media are also marketed here (like McDonalds, Disney, etc.) through cross-promotions, in-game ads, and advergames while simultaneously collecting market research. This exemplifies the convergence of traditional media with new digital media whereby the same types of products and brands are reaching young consumers in multiple ways. Several academics (Grimes & Shade, 2005; Seiter, 2004) have found that NeoPets are paradigmatic of immersive advertising and the capitalist logic by reinforcing the “ethos of acquisition and entrepreneurialism as entertainment” (Grimes & Shade, 2005, p. 195) through the intrusive commodification of young people’s cultural and social online spaces. This is particularly problematic because as Seiter (2004) notes, while TV commercial spots and banner ads are easily identified as advertising, these new immersive strategies found in gaming are difficult for young people to fully ascertain the scope and depth of surveillance, data mining, and marketing that actually take place.
2.2.4. **Co-creation and New Governmentality**

While immersive advertising is pervasive today, the interactive technologies in gaming produce new and specific kinds of biopower and governmentality. Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody (2008) describe this as a deliberate strategy to co-opt the technical and social competencies of consumers to increase profits. They describe this as ‘co-creation’ that “[reconfigures] marketing as a technology of consumer exploitation and control suitable for the complex machinations of global information capitalism than with a concern for increasing ‘customer value’” (Zwick et al., 2008, p. 167). Consumers are increasingly sceptical and weary of overt marketing strategies which means that firms must find new ways of targeting them by offering platforms to experiment and create while in turn, exploiting and commodifying their productive capacities. This constructs an environment that falsely situates consumers as the ones ‘holding the reins’ and avoids the use of overt marketing strategies that consumers are so cynical of. Instead, consumers immerse themselves in a space where they feel that they have the freedom to create, but within the boundaries of the prescribed practices and outcomes set out by the firms.

The benefits of co-creation for firms are twofold: it ensures that firms can better manage the risk of deviant or resistant interpretations and uses of their products and services, while also expropriating the valuable technical, social, and cultural competencies towards the production and innovation of goods and services. All the while, the ‘work’ of consumers goes unwaged and corporations continue reaping the financial benefits of this exploitation. By expropriating consumer knowledge, marketers are able to stay up-to-date while also ensuring the perpetual innovation of products and services driven by the tastes, skills, and ideas of their consumers. In other words, the general intellect of consumers is “channeled into raw material for the firm’s commodity production” (Zwick et al., 2008, p. 177).

Zwick et al. (2008) also argue that this is indicative of a new governmentality that produces a new form of life in which customers readily and enthusiastically provide unwaged and exploited labour. This is particularly exploitative because co-creation relies on
...enlisting unpaid customers to co-produce the products and services, which are converted to money in the market often by selling to the same people whose labor helped to produce them, [which] corresponds to the expropriation of surplus value from consumer labor. (Zwick et al., 2008, p. 179-180).

The experience of producing becomes the commodity; or put simply, production is consumption. As firms take control of both production and consumption practices, the “disciplinary power of capital successfully configures docile customers required for the efficient functioning of rationalized systems of capitalist production” (Zwick et al., 2008, p. 183). The docility required for the perpetuation of capitalism is ensured by subsuming productive capacities of consumers through the apparatus of co-creation. Even acts of resistance or subversion through consumers’ own appropriation of these platforms are still instances of exploitation since any production is a form of consumption. This places more emphasis on the importance of customer management that relies on a careful and strategic balance between encouraging consumer creativity and experimentation, and creating a structured environment with prescribed goals and outcomes. It is in this way that customer management through the mechanism of co-creation functions as a form of governmentality whereby corporations rely on consumers to ‘freely’ act and produce, while also managing that freedom towards a specific outcome.

A recent example of co-creation is the development of Star Wars: The Old Republic, a subscription-based MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role playing game). Prior to its official launch in December 2011, EA and BioWare⁴ announced that starting in September 2011, they were going to invite selected players to take part in ‘Beta Test Weekends’. This strategy enabled EA and BioWare to promote the game by creating early ‘buzz’ while also leveraging the knowledge and skills of players to take part in game testing. Each Beta Test Weekend invited a different group of players whose emails EA already had access to through older generations of the game. During the testing, they would get to play for free while reporting bugs and glitches, and providing

⁴ EA was the publisher and Bioware was the developer.
feedback throughout the gameplay. As such, this type of model typifies the new
governmentality that Zwick et al. (2008) describe by “[bringing] about particular forms of
life in which consumers voluntarily provide unwaged and exploited, yet enjoyed labor
[sic]” (p. 176). The exploitative nature of this model is evident in EA’s press release:

As anticipation grows, BioWare also proudly announced today that Star
Wars: The Old Republic will open "Beta Test Weekends" starting this
September. These weekend play sessions will be open to selected
players worldwide and create an opportunity for fans to get a sneak peek
of the epic stories, worlds, quests, battles and characters in the game...
We are taking all of the necessary steps to make sure The Old Republic
has a thriving community built on a stable online foundation from day
one... (“EA Unveils Special Editions...” July 21, 2011; emphasis added)

EA uses strategic rhetoric to promote the experience of getting exclusive access to the
game through the Beta Test Weekends: Only those selected players have the
opportunity to get a sneak peek into the epic features of the game in order to help create
a thriving community so that the game will have a stable online foundation. It tries to
suggest that participating in the Beta Test Weekends will give them exclusive access
while also suggesting that the quality of the game is in the hands of its players and as
part of being selected, it is their duty to ensure the game is successful. This kind of
rhetoric is indicative of positioning “consumers as partners in mutually beneficial
innovation and production processes” (Zwick et al., 2008, p. 168) in such a way that the
“actual use value is dependent upon consumers’ added labor [sic] input” (p. 175). The
Beta Test Weekends proved to be successful: the game reportedly garnered
approximately 1 million users in three days after its launch (Rundle, 2011).

Co-creation also raises an important problem in the network society: intellectual
property rights. The successful operation of co-creation relies on consumer creativity to
generate value and profit while firms offer and manage the platforms for this kind of work
to be done. But this kind of management relies on mechanisms such as “direct
purchase, licensing deals, and franchise management” that enable firms to control the
access and distribution of knowledge (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 44). As
such, intellectual property laws ultimately favour the rights of corporations. This
demonstrates a paradox in online games between enclosures and access. For example,
in 2001, EA released an update for The Sims that allowed players to hack, encouraging
a much more open gameplay (Kline et al., 2003). Around the same time, EA was also aggressively combatting piracy through legal action. In 1999, they partnered with Sony to file civil suits against a games warez\(^5\) group called Paradigm. As well, they partnered with Sega and Nintendo and filed a lawsuit against Yahoo for allegedly allowing the sales of counterfeit video games, copyright and trademark infringement, and unfair competition (Kline et al., 2003, p. 282). Thus, an important question is often raised: Who can claim to own the contents of the game? A significant part of the game industry’s success is dependent on player commitment and participation. But, despite these forms of participation that help to provide value to these games, ultimately those who control the game through patents, copyrights, and access to servers can “police, contain, and constrain the use of such machines to keep it within the boundaries of commercial profit, and to wipe out hacker practices” (ibid.). Thus, the idea that players or consumers are empowered by new forms of participation is eclipsed by the unequal distribution of power between the game industry and its consumers.

2.3. The Other Side of the Participation Paradox: The Rise of a Participatory Culture

The idea of ‘participation paradox’ best illustrates the complexities of the network society (Hoeschmann & Poyntz, 2012; Poyntz 2010). It draws attention to the intimate relationship that young people’s media lives have with an increasingly pervasive consumer culture while also acknowledging the possibilities for meaningful production and participation in the construction of their subjectivities. But the emergence of a participatory culture alongside the intensification of consumer culture points to the saliency of an ongoing tension between structures of neoliberal capitalism and the agency of young people. While some researchers, like Zwick et al. (2008), argue that

\(^5\) Warez refers to copyrighted content that has been illegally distributed for free through online networks using private File Transfer Protocol (FTP) servers, Internet Relay Chat, and temporary ‘pop-up’ websites for distribution. A warez group consists of highly skilled hackers, traders, and collectors who help to circulate copyrighted content (Kline et al., 2003, p. 211-213).
these practices are exploitative because it co-opts the work of consumers for capital accumulation, I contend that this argument ignores how these practices are simultaneously meaningful and important to consumers in terms of sociality, identity formation, and play. Consumer culture is indeed a pervasive force in young people’s media practices, but the rise of network connections and digital, network technologies can also offer “access to new social structures (collective intelligence) and new models of cultural production (participatory culture)” (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 257). This gives consumers the power to participate and to challenge older hierarchical models of knowledge and cultural production. Thus, a participatory culture based on a collaborative ethos sets the foundation for a potentially profound shift in how consumption can include meaningful participation.

The interactive and dialogic affordances of digital, network technologies have arguably fostered a participatory culture that repositions young people as active cultural producers rather than just passive consumers (though it is arguable whether they ever were). New media such as online gaming offer avenues for meaningful expression, communication, and sociality that were never possible through older communication technologies such as television, radio, and even the Internet during its Web 1.0 era. But as Ito et al. (2010) argue, young people’s engagement with new media is not indicative of an inherently empowering quality of digital media with its own logic and agenda. Instead, youth media practices are reflective of important cultural and social shifts that are taking place in their lifeworlds which consequently will affect how new media can be meaningfully used “for social action and cultural expression” (Ito et al., 2010, p. 4). Therefore, it is absolutely essential to understand what is happening ‘on the ground’ in order to recognize and understand how young people are exploring and affirming their agencies. In other words, I seek to ask how young people are using gaming as a way of taking up the task of constructing their subjective identities despite an inescapably consumer-mediated digital culture.

2.3.1. Genres of Gaming

Despite the challenges posed by the structural conditions of the game industry as outlined above, many researchers have noted that gaming has become a contemporary dominant form of participatory culture that enables young people to find meaning
through gaming practices. In other words, it has become the “lingua franca for participation in the digital age” (Ito & Bittanti, 2010, p. 240). As Taylor (2007) notes, players do not always follow the prescribed ways of playing or understanding a game. Instead, game practices and experiences are diverse, depending on the players’ subjectivities, tastes, and needs. Ito et al.’s (2010) work on genres of participation, and more specifically, Ito and Bittanti’s (2010) work on genres of gaming provide a useful descriptive framework for understanding and interpreting the diverse range of gaming practices that constitute a participatory culture.

Ito et al. (2010) identify ‘genres of participation’ to describe the diverse and wide-ranging ways in which young people participate in mediated cultural practices in their everyday lives. They argue that articulating participation through genres highlights the “interpretive dimensions of human orderliness” and emphasizes the way in which people engage with media is through “interpretive recognition” as opposed to “habituation or structuring” (p. 15). The authors distinguish between friendship-driven and interest-driven genres of participation to reflect the “different genres of youth culture, social network structure, and modes of learning” (p. 15). Friendship-driven genres of participation refer to media practices that are largely extensions of offline, social worlds. They function as a way to build on and strengthen local relationships between peers and friends that they meet and interact with in offline everyday contexts such as school, place of worship, or organized sports. An example of this would be the use of Facebook in providing an additional space for youth to establish copresence and strengthen their offline ties. Interest-driven genres of participation occur when youth are driven to strengthen their social networks that centre on “interests, hobbies, and career aspirations” (p. 16) as opposed to friendships. Often, youth seek to expand their interests through these sets of practices by interacting and learning with others who share their interests as opposed to solely trying to strengthen offline relationships.

Within these two categorizations of genres of participation identified by Ito et al. (2010), there are three specific genres to describe the “differing levels of investment in new media activities in a way that integrates an understanding of technical, social, and cultural patterns” (Horst et al., 2010, p. 36): ‘hanging out’, ‘messing around’, and ‘geeking out’. Hanging out refers to friendship-driven media practices that enable young people to construct spaces to socialize and interact with their friends and peers. Messing
around describes transitional media practices situated between friendship-driven and interest-driven practices that are less motivated by a desire for social connection, but introduces a more committed level of engagement with media like playful experimentation. Geeking out refers to intense interest-driven media practices that require certain competencies that enable experimentation that challenge social and technological rules. Ito et al. also note that by conceptualizing media practice as a set of genres, they are recognizing that particular practices are not tied to categories of people but reflect changes in contexts and identities that require a fluidity in how young people engage with media at particular times and places. In this way, their work reflects an ecological understanding of the relationships between new media, participatory cultures, and young people.

To further this, the work of Ito and Bittanti’s (2010) genres of gaming illustrate the diversity of gaming practices and experiences to reveal how dynamic and complex game culture can be:

1. **Killing time** involves playing games to fill up ‘dead time’ or to procrastinate. This genre is typically solitary in that games are used as a “one-on-one” space. It is also usually more suited to young or inexperienced players, or when longer sessions of gameplay are unfeasible (p. 202-206).

2. **Hanging out** involves playing a game in order to socialize and hang out. Online gaming functions as an activity to do within a shared social space, similar to traditional board games. This can be accomplished by either working together towards a common goal or by competition that enable “playful conflict” as a means for “social bonding” (p. 206-209).

3. **Recreational gaming** requires a higher level of commitment than hanging out because it sees gameplay as the “impetus” for gathering together, whereas hanging out sees gathering together as the “impetus” for gameplay. It is still a highly social practice in that social relationships and knowledge communities play a significant role in supplementing and strengthening gameplay, a practice Ito and Bittanti refer to as ‘peer-based learning’ (p. 209-213).

4. **Organizing and mobilizing** typifies ‘geeking out’ because it involves a more structured and formalized mode of gaming. Membership and active engagement in formal social organizations like guilds is a common practice. It also requires a more sophisticated understanding of the workings of a game, technology, and social networks (p. 214-220).
5. *Augmented game play* describes a deeper engagement with gaming that goes beyond gameplay. It includes participation with “secondary productions that are part of the knowledge networks surrounding game play” (p. 220). While many players often seek out and consult secondary texts for additional knowledge, the actual production of these secondary texts is what constitutes augmented game play. It also requires a high level of technical and social competency that enable practices like modding and customization beyond the game’s original design (p. 220-227).

Their research findings illustrate a spectrum in terms of the level of commitment and competencies needed to participate. It also suggests that games can potentially act as a pathway to developing important competencies and experiences that can enable young people to become more active and engaged members of a participatory culture, regardless of their level of commitment. As well, the game genre does not necessarily determine the genre of participation that a player takes up (Ito & Bittanti 2010). Certain genres may be more suited for particular genres of gaming, but ultimately, it is up the player to determine how and for what purpose they will participate. This emphasizes the potential of gaming as a valuable form of participatory culture because gaming enables a diverse range of practices. This also reveals the agency of players because they get to choose which practices they want to take up, as opposed to having particular participatory practices imposed on them from the top-down. In this way, players manipulate and leverage gaming in ways that reflect their needs which epitomizes the potential of participatory culture in an era of intense consumer culture.

### 2.3.2. Convergence Culture

A culture of convergence reveals the complex ways in which “grassroots and corporate media intersect, [and] where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 270). We have seen how firms implement convergence as a way to increase delivery channels and intensify the relationship between consumers and brands. But at the same time, convergence has put new demands on consumers in which participation is not just spectatorship but an understanding of how content is interrelated and having an active concurrent engagement with various media channels. The form of participation that Jenkins (2006a) refers to is the ability for young people to “bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers” (p. 18). Buckingham and
Sefton-Green's (2003) work on young consumers and Pokémon reveals the sophisticated abilities of Pokémon fans to understand and engage with the game and its narratives across seemingly disparate entry points. As such, Pokémon is not simply a commodity to consume but rather, a cultural practice. Similarly, Ito et al. (2010) introduce the concept of ‘networked publics’ to emphasize young people’s growing reliance on online networks to actively participate in the public sphere through the production and distribution of culture. Benkler (2006) also describes these new practices that have enabled the formation of networked publics as ‘commons-based peer production’, that is “radically decentralized, collaborative, and nonproprietary” (p. 60) by enabling users to pool resources, learn from one another, and exchange ideas based on a commons-based ethos of sharing, and not solely for profiting. It is through these kinds of practices enabled by a culture of convergence that young people are able to negotiate their identities through collaborative forms of participation.

2.3.3. Collective Intelligence and Affinity Spaces

What is central to a participatory culture is its collaborative ethos. The open-ended nature of digital, network technologies dismantle the traditional notion of expertise and enables a bottom-up grassroots production of knowledge through the mobilization of collective intelligence. This refers to the ability of participants to be able to combine and share knowledge in an online space towards a common goal, revealing the social and dynamic nature of collective intelligence (Jenkins 2006a; Jenkins et al. 2009). Furthermore, collective intelligence is based on four inherent assumptions that emphasize the legitimacy of its participants: it “[draws] on the combined knowledge of a more diverse community”; recognizes the value of each person’s potential to contribute; the participant decides what s/he will do with knowledge; and the lived experiences of its participants are valued (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 52-54). In gaming, collective intelligence takes place in a myriad of ways: secondary texts like unofficial forums, websites, and YouTube videos; learning from fellow players by watching and socializing; and participating in larger, formal online communities like guilds.

Gee’s (2004) concept of ‘affinity spaces’ describes how social spaces are designed to enable the formation and sharing of knowledge with others based on similar interests or common goals, and not on traditional markers like race, age, and gender. By
using the term ‘space’ rather than ‘community’, he is emphasizing the social configuration required to enable participation and learning rather than on membership based on these markers. According to Gee, the notion of ‘community’ can limit the discussion of participatory cultures because participation is based on its association with who and what constitutes membership rather than on emphasizing the actual practices that are being taken up. Jenkins et al. (2009) argue that this makes affinity spaces particularly powerful because

...they are sustained by common endeavours that bridge differences—age, class, race, gender, and educational level—and because people can participate in various ways according to their skills and interests, because they depend on peer-to-peer teaching with each participant constantly motivated to acquire new knowledge or refine their existing skills, and because they allow each participant to feel like an expert while tapping the expertise of others. (p. 10)

As such, Gee (2003, 2007) also argues that games operate as robust and vibrant affinity spaces that encourage players to collaborate and mobilize their collective intelligence towards achieving a goal. In this way, gaming becomes a ‘social enterprise’ that relies on the social exchanges between players to generate and share knowledge.

McGonigal’s (2007) work describes the practices of collective intelligence and illuminates the types of affinity spaces that emerged out of a virtual reality game called, I Love Bees (originally designed as a marketing campaign for Halo 2). The game was first introduced to players in a subliminal message with a URL (ilovebees.com) in the original Halo game. When players went to the website, it appeared as a crude website dedicated to beekeeping that had been hacked by an unknown intelligence. The game designers relied on the convergence of multiple media forms like websites, images, videos, emails and mp3s to create an immersive and interactive narrative that players had to uncover. Over time, the designers would distribute clues in various forms which players collected, combined, and interpreted together. McGonigal, one of the game designers, explains that the game was intentionally created to encourage “a highly connected player base dedicated to, and impressively capable of, defining and solving large-scale problems together” (p. 204). As a result, players organized into groups; created networks; established wiki pages and other websites; and mobilized offline in order to work together to solve the mystery of the website. The sheer amount of coordination,
organization, and collective intelligence of the player base reveals the impressive ability for players to collaborate and share knowledge using whatever resources are available to them. As a result, McGonigal explains that players experienced valuable peer-based learning and developed important competencies through these practices that could easily be applied to other arenas of life. As such, gaming can potentially provide a low-risk environment for “risk-taking learning” that leverages affinity spaces to mobilize collective intelligence towards a collaborative goal (p. 222; also see Jenkins et al. 2009).

Games have the potential to operate as valuable affinity spaces in how players can come together to learn and collaborate with one another. The gaming genres outlined above point to the range of how and why players leverage their collective intelligence in their virtual play, such as to strengthen real life relationships by hanging out, to mobilize their gameplay for more organized goals, or to produce and share secondary texts of knowledge and information. It is this potential that points to the agentic possibilities of gaming: regardless of the ways in which capital shapes the terms of participation, the inherently social aspect of gaming offers players meaningful forms of participation by collaborating and learning from one another. This also has important implications for identity formation since for many young people, sociality, collaboration, and learning are closely tied to identity.

2.3.4. **Gaming and Identity**

Participatory cultures such as gaming also enable important practices for identity formation. In gaming, one way this is achieved is through assuming online identities in the form of avatars. Gee (2003) refers to this as “tripartite play of identities” to describe the interrelationship between three different identities: the real-world identity who plays the computer game; the virtual identity who is the online character being played; and what he calls the “projective identity”. This identity is the most complex but is perhaps the most revealing in terms of identity work. Gee uses the term ‘project’ in two ways to describe how the projective identity is formed: “to project one’s values and desires onto the virtual character” and “seeing the virtual character as one’s own project in the making” (p. 55; emphasis added). What this means is that identity work in gaming is both a process and a product: it enables players to find and create meaning in and through
the online character they play, while also emerging from the game with a deeper understanding of themselves.

Players can also develop different forms of gamer identities through what Ito and Bittanti (2010) refer to as ‘boundary work’ that “involves constructing boundaries between gamers and nongamers” (p. 228). The authors argue that genres of gaming are linked with different gamer identities based on gender and geek identities. Each genre requires a different level of commitment—that is, a certain level of geeking out—that is more socially acceptable and common for each gender. The authors found that it was far less common and socially acceptable for girls to identify as gamers. While some girls seem to express interest in gaming associated with messing around and geeking out, their participation is often as ‘spectators’ of these practices or they adopt more friendship-driven practices. Killing time and hanging out are widely seen as more “inclusive” in the sense that boys and girls, and gamers and nongamers alike adopt these genres at one point or another. On the other hand, genres like recreational, mobilizing and organizing, and augmented gameplay are more “exclusionary” because they rely on higher levels of commitment and expertise, and more invested participation in interest-driven social networks. Therefore, the messing around and geeking out practices involved in these genres make it more suited to players who identify themselves as gamers. They also argue that recreational gaming is similar to sports activity in boys’ offline worlds in terms of sociality and identity work. But an important difference is that while participation in sports gives status in their local friendship-driven networks, gamer identity does not translate in the same way. As well, the authors note that gamers who practice more interest-driven genres identify themselves as ‘geeks’, which suggests players’ recognition that they have a higher level of commitment and expertise than some of their peers, as well as an understanding that these practices may not necessarily translate socially in the same way other similar activities (like sports) might. To summarize, gaming identities are largely dependent on the genres of gaming that require varying levels of commitment and expertise which are closely tied to gender relations and geek identities. The complex practices of boundary work reveal the role of gaming practices in articulating and reflecting “the broader social and cultural dynamics of youth culture” (Ito & Bittanti, 2010, p. 235). It also illuminates how gaming has become a central part in how young people are participating in constructing their lifeworlds.
2.4. Conclusion

The perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism as the dominant contemporary socioeconomic paradigm has lead to new forms of governmentality through the intensification of consumer culture. For young people, this means that their subjectivities are increasingly shaped by the logic of capitalism through their consumption of new media. However, as the work of Ito and Bittanti (2010) illustrate, young people are taking up gaming practices that help to develop important competencies and practices to engage in participatory cultures despite the capitalist logic that pervades these very spaces and tools that enable them to do so. These practices and competencies include identity work, collaboration, and sociality that all point to how robust and dynamic young people's relationship is with new media. This illustrates the tension between the socioeconomic structures that undergird young people's cultural industries and the agency of consumers as active participants. Gaming offers a fitting point of entry into this debate by understanding it as paradigmatic forms of post-Fordist capitalism and of participatory culture. Often discourses about young people's media lives tend to ignore meaning-making practices in favour of structural analyses, or over-celebrate the participatory potential of new media, but it is the goal of this thesis to illustrate that while the structural conditions of capitalism do shape the terms of participation, meaningful forms of participation can and do take place within those structures. The genres of gaming specifically illustrate the diverse range of agentic possibilities that are enabled through gaming, despite the powerful and pervasive role of capital in how games are created, distributed, and marketed. The following section describes how I conducted a case study using a critical ethnographic approach to better understand the tensions between the structures of capitalism and the game industry, and the agency of players by examining how my informants took up meaningful gaming practices in and through the creative affordances of Minecraft that point to the agentic potential of gameplay. Ultimately, it is my goal to illustrate that young people are active participants in the formation of their own culture, despite the increasing intensification of consumer culture in their everyday lives.

3.1. Introduction

The following chapter will outline the research design for this thesis. The first section outlines the purpose of this study and the research questions that frame my inquiry. The next section provides an explanation of the methodological approach I used; namely, critical ethnography. I then describe my participants’ and the methods used to recruit them. I detail the research methods used to gather and analyze data, and conclude by providing a rationale for using Minecraft as my site of inquiry.

3.2. Research Questions

As a fan of Minecraft and other online games, my goal is to make a case for understanding gaming as a legitimate meaningful, social practice that enables young people to find and create meaning through identity work, sociality, and having fun. All are important practices that can and do take place in gameplay. Too often, games are scapegoats for larger societal problems and are often connected to issues around addictions, violent or anti-social behaviour, or consumerism. With this goal in mind, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

6 While I identify myself as a fan of gaming, I do not identify myself as a gamer because my level of gameplay is limited in skill, knowledge, and commitment. Aside from Minecraft, my forms of ‘geeking out’ are primarily observing and appreciating my partner’s and friends’ gaming abilities. Any other instances of gameplay are usually for social or ‘killing time’ purposes than anything else.
1. What kinds of meaningful practices do the creative affordances in Minecraft enable?

2. How does gameplay in Minecraft enable young people to assert their agency in the context of a neoliberal network society?

By ‘meaningful’, I draw on the work of Livingstone (2002), who argues: “as socially meaningful phenomena, ICTs are not pre-given, fully-formed, automatically determining of the manner of their use, but rather their meanings depend on the context, contingent ways in which they are, over time, inserted into specific contexts and practices of use” (p. 15). Like Livingstone, I emphasize the importance of context in understanding how gaming operates as a meaningful practice. Gaming does not happen in a vacuum but rather, the ways in which it is taken up wholly depends on a myriad of influences such as the personal needs and goals of the player. By considering the influence of context in gaming, I can better understand how gaming plays a meaningful role in my participants’ everyday lives. As such, I evaluate meaningfulness in the following ways: 1) how my participants themselves articulate gaming as a meaningful practice to them (such as, spending time with friends and improving gameplay expertise), and 2) how gaming practices operate as a pathway for developing valuable competencies and experiences to become an active member of a participatory culture.

3.3. Rationale for a Critical Ethnographic Approach to a Case Study

This research employs a critical ethnographic approach to a case study that is situated within the tradition of conventional ethnography. It does not employ traditional ethnography in the sense that my purpose is not to fully describe the cultural environment of my participants; nor do I spend an extended period of time in the ‘field’. Instead, it is bound in terms of its specific focus and short duration, which characterizes the nature of this study as an “instrumental case study” that uses a case “to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization” (Stake, 2005, p. 445). This study examines the specific case of Minecraft over a period of approximately five months to gain insight into how gaming enables agentic possibilities within the structure of post-Fordist capitalism. Furthermore, case studies also seek to uncover the “particular” rather than the “ordinary” (Stake, 2005) and the case of Minecraft seems to offer a unique
insight into how the open-ended, creative openings of its design and the role of peer production in its development foster diverse and meaningful forms of participation. As Ito and Bittanti (2010) note, genres of gaming practices are not dependent on the type of game that is played, but on the broader cultural and social ecologies of its players. Minecraft is one case that illuminates what players can accomplish and experience through a game that is much more open than other mainstream games.

This study also employs ethnographic methods of inquiry such as interviews and participant observations for the purpose of understanding the role of gaming in young people’s everyday lives in relation to larger issues of the structures of consumer culture and the agency of consumer/participants. Thus, a critical ethnography as a methodological approach best describes my use of ethnographic methods, but for a more specific purpose. Both share numerous characteristics such as the use of qualitative interpretation of data, ethnographic methods and analysis, adherence to a symbolic interactionist paradigm, and a tendency for developing grounded theory (Thomas, 1993, p. 3). But critical ethnography’s inherent political nature is what makes it most suitable for the purpose of my research. This approach enables me to focus on issues of structure, agency, and power, and to reconceptualise gaming in ways that recognizes the meaningful experiences and practices that my participants take up through gameplay (Thomas, 1993).

Conventional ethnography focuses on the importance of everyday practices as a way to explore how people come to understand their lived realities (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Tedlock, 2000). Traditionally, the researcher goes into the field to observe, capture, and interpret the nuances of people’s everyday practices in order to capture the culture or subculture of a particular group of people (Tedlock, 2000). But while conventional ethnography seeks to describe “what is”, critical ethnography seeks to uncover “what could be” by identifying, describing, and understanding how and where power and oppression take place (Thomas, 1993, p. 4). In doing so, it challenges “taken-for-granted assumptions” by moving beyond descriptions and revealing underlying structures of power and repression (Madison, 2005, p. 5). This thesis aims to both describe what my participants are doing in and through Minecraft, and to unpack the larger questions of how the capitalist paradigm is subsuming cultural production in online spaces even while enabling young people to assert their agency through meaningful
media practices. Furthermore, the structure versus agency dichotomy articulated through these questions is a political one because it recognizes the unequal balance of power between the structure of capitalism and the agency of consumer/participants. As such, critical ethnography offers a useful methodological framework that enables me to take up issues around power and agency through ethnographic methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Critical ethnography also places a different emphasis on the role of researchers’ relationship with their informants. Thomas (1993) argues that conventional ethnographers tend to “speak for their subjects, usually to an audience of other researchers” whereas, critical ethnographers “speak to an audience on behalf of their subjects as a means of empowering them by giving more authority to their subjects’ voice” (p. 4; original emphasis). The value of this difference is that my role as the researcher is not only to describe my participants’ experiences and practices in Minecraft, but also to interpret those descriptions through a critical lens that seeks to understand and bring to light issues around power and agency. In other words, epistemologically, my goal as the researcher is to interpret the experiences and practices of the participants as empowered, political agents with the capacity to actively participate in the construction of their subjectivities.

While my participants do not experience oppression or social control in a coercive sense, critical ethnography’s emphasis on relations of power are relevant because corporate power and coercion cannot be ignored in understanding how gaming impacts youth agency. The ethnographic methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation are valuable in observing and understanding the participants’ everyday practices related to gaming in Minecraft. But critical ethnography serves as a particularly valuable methodological approach because quite often, young people constitute a special group in our society that is often spoken for by ‘legitimate actors’ like adults who supposedly ‘know best’. By focusing on the bottom-up participatory practices of my participants within the context of post-Fordist capitalism, I can better understand how young people are asserting their agency in the face of the larger structural conditions of consumer culture that shape their media practices.
From a pragmatic perspective, an ethnographic approach is also useful because it requires a certain degree of flexibility and improvisation that I believe is necessary for my research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Fontana & Frey, 2005). Since my goal is to understand how young people are creating and sharing meaningful practices through gameplay from their perspective, it is important to remain flexible and open to exploring other areas that I may not have considered but are important to the research participants. Below, I detail how I exercised flexibility in my chosen methodological approaches.

Lastly, as I note in Section 1.3, I draw from Ito et al. (2010) by avoiding the conceptualization of media practices as inherently emancipatory with their own logic and agenda. Instead, I view technology as having a dialectical relationship with society that can largely shape and influence the potential for both bottom-up and top-down production. Thus, I aim to focus this study on the agentic potential of young people and not technology; in other words, my goal is to understand how young people create meaning, and not how technologies create meaning for them.

3.4. Research Methods

In the following section, I will provide an overview of how I selected my participants and how I used interviews and participation observations to gather my data. I also detail how I used a group interview and virtual participation observations with two of my participants to further triangulate my findings. I end with how I analyzed my data.

3.4.1. Participant Selection

I began recruiting my research participants by asking students if they play Minecraft in the introductory Communication course at Simon Fraser University (SFU) that I was a Tutorial Assistant (TA) for. After the semester was over, I contacted those students by email with a detailed description of my study and the participation
requirements needed from them. I wanted to contact them after my role as their TA was over so that there were no feelings of obligation or anxieties that a refusal to participate would result in adverse effects in the course. I was able to recruit 3 participants (all under a pseudonym): Carlito, a 19-year-old male student; TNT, a 19-year-old female student whose friend was a former student; and MC949, a 9-year-old male student whose mother was a former student. My last participant, Jan, is a 19-year-old male student who I contacted through TNT and was added to my selection much later than my first three. All participants gave me their informed consent by way of signing a consent form.

There were specific requirements that each participant needed to meet in order to be selected for this study. First, they needed to be located in the Lower Mainland because of convenience and ease for me to be able to conduct my research. As well, since I am a resident of the Metro Vancouver area, I am familiar with the socioeconomic and cultural environment, which will be helpful for my research. Second, I required the participants to play the beta version of Minecraft, as opposed to the free web browser version. This is because the beta version is a paid, downloaded version that enables for more advanced gameplay by allowing players to save their progress, join in public and private servers, and play in both survival and creative modes. The free web browser version is limiting in terms of what it allows players to do. As such, players who only use the browser version illustrate a much more casual level of gameplay that did not seem suitable for this study. Lastly, I required the participants to play Minecraft on a regular basis, that is, at least once a week. Regular gameplay ensured that the participant was

participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms to protect their anonymity but to also reaffirm their agency to be able to describe their experiences and their identities on their own terms.

For MC949, his mother signed his consent form but I also verbally reviewed a simplified consent form with him because I felt it was important that I recognize his role in being a part of this process. At his request (after seeing his mother sign a consent form), I also let him sign the verbal consent form script.

At the time of conducting research, the game was still in beta. However, at the time of writing, the full version of the game has been released.
genuinely interested and committed to the game; as well, it ensured that my asking them to play did not make it feel unnatural or forced.

In order to establish a rapport with my participants, I made sure to clearly communicate that I also regularly play Minecraft (Fontana & Frey, 2005). This seemed particularly important to my participants. For example, when I first contacted TNT about participating in this study, one of her first questions was: “Do you play Minecraft?” before agreeing to participate. I think that by presenting myself as a fan of Minecraft, it assured them that my interest was not just about pursuing an academic goal but also because of a personal interest in gaming. It also better enabled me to relate and understand the language and culture of Minecraft, which helped the participants feel more comfortable sharing their experiences with me (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Further, it made it easier for them to describe their experiences without having to provide additional background explanation or details. This facilitated a more natural and conversational dialogue between us, which allowed a certain level of easiness and fluidity in how we collaborated. It also allowed me to be able to ask more nuanced questions based on my own experiences that I do not think would have been possible if I were not personally familiar with the language and culture of the game. In other words, being a player as well as a researcher allowed me to create a shared experience of meaning whereby both the participant and myself were able to better “understand the contextual nature of specific referents” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 713). This was also useful when I was able to join a private server with TNT and Jan. My familiarity with the game meant that I did not have to rely on them to know how to actually play and instead, I was actually able to play with them and thereby better experience how gaming plays a role in their lives.

3.4.2. Data Collection and Research Procedure

I collected ethnographic data through informal and formal interviews, and participant observations. With each participant, I conducted a preliminary interview, then held two participant observation sessions that included unstructured interviews, each of which lasted approximately 2 hours, and a final interview. After each interview and observation session, I recorded field notes immediately following each session containing descriptions and reflections of what I had just observed and experienced. For
Jan, my last participant, my research procedure slightly differed which I will detail at the end of this section.

The preliminary interview was formal and unstructured, and was conducted either in a private study room at the Bennett Library at SFU or in the participants’ home. The interviews were voice recorded and I took field notes throughout the interview to document gestures, observations, and any insight I had along the way. The purpose was to get a sense of how they understood their own forms of participation and what made Minecraft meaningful to them. I prepared a list of open-ended interview questions that enabled me to stay focused on the purpose of the first interview. But if the participant wanted to talk more about a particular issue or activity, I was flexible and went in that direction. Since the goal was for me to understand how they viewed Minecraft, I wanted to ensure that I gave them the freedom to further expand on whatever areas they felt were important to discuss. A challenge with this was that I ran the risk of going ‘off topic’ as we began sharing our experiences of playing Minecraft with each other. This is where the prepared questions were particularly useful as I was able to draw the interview back to the research. However, I think a certain amount of off-topic conversation was useful for building a rapport with my participants and also learning more about their interests and experiences outside of my intended scope of understanding.

Following the preliminary interviews, I conducted two two-hour participant observation sessions in the participants’ homes. I asked them to play Minecraft like they ‘normally’ do\(^\text{10}\) in an effort to observe them play in an environment that felt ‘natural’ to them. Carlito’s observation sessions were conducted in his bedroom where he has his own desktop computer. He played music, occasionally checked Facebook, and left Skype open on his desktop to communicate with his friends during his gameplay. TNT

\(^\text{10}\) To do this, I asked them to do whatever they usually do when they play as long as they did not join public servers (because I did not have ethical approval for that). This meant that they could listen to music, visit other websites, use Skype or visit Facebook, or whatever other activities they did alongside gameplay. It also meant that they could play wherever they usually do, whether it was on a laptop in the family living room or a desktop in their bedroom.
also had her own desktop computer in her bedroom. She did not have any other websites or social networking platforms open and instead, had blank pieces of paper by her keyboard to be able to sketch ideas and designs to do on Minecraft. MC949 used his mother’s laptop at a desk in the family living room. In both sessions, he had the Internet browser open to watch YouTube videos and Google search ideas. Lastly, Jan played on his laptop, but in the den of his family home. Similar to Carlito, playing music was an important part of his gaming routine. While the participants were able to carry out routines that were typical of how they play Minecraft, I acknowledge that my presence consequently affected my participants and thus any attempt to establish a purely ‘natural’ environment was impossible (Angrosino, 2005).

For the observation sessions, I audio recorded the informal interviews that took place during our time together. But I did not film these sessions, as I was afraid that it would make the participants feel even more uncomfortable about being observed. As well, I felt particularly uncomfortable with the idea of being filmed and thought that it would affect my ability to be a good researcher. As such, I took detailed field notes throughout the session and marked the specific times when my participant did something notable so that I could locate it in the audio recording. I did not prepare any interview questions, and instead relied on a largely unstructured format. I heavily relied on what I was observing to inform me of what kinds of questions I would ask. Often, the purpose of these questions was to ask for further clarification or an explanation about what they were doing and why they were doing it. I was also mindful of seeing whether their gameplay was congruent or incongruent with the insights they provided in the preliminary interviews. In other words, were my participants playing Minecraft in a way that reflected how they said that they felt about the game? In what ways did their gameplay illustrate values that were important to them? How did the participants use Minecraft to explore these values and create meaning? These kinds of questions informed what I would try to look for in my observations, in addition to other relevant and valuable practices that I may not have considered previously. The second observation session followed the same format as the first session. The purpose of a second observation session was to address any challenges or mistakes I made during the first observation session, as well as an opportunity to thicken my description and gain a deeper understanding of my participants and their use of Minecraft.
My personal experience with the game was useful for this method because I was already familiar with many of the game mechanics, rules, and language. Therefore, the observations enabled me to gain insight into the nuances of my participants’ gameplay and not on gaining a basic understanding of the game itself as well. One of the challenges of using this method was being consciously aware of how my presence affected them. I needed to be mindful of when and how to ask questions to avoid further disrupting their practices. I also needed to be careful that I was not imposing my own biases on the participants as I watched them play. There were numerous occasions where I needed to ‘bite my tongue’, so to speak, and not tell them what to do or how to do it and avoid a paternalistic approach in how I questioned and observed them. So while a familiarity with the game was helpful on one hand, it also created challenges. In particular, I found it difficult at times to be open to alternative situated practices that were different than my own experience with Minecraft. It is because of these challenges and my position as a novice researcher that I knew it would be valuable to have a second observation session.

I concluded with one final interview session after about a month of conducting the final observation session. I wanted to review my research data before I conducted this final interview because I wanted to formulate questions that would address some of the patterns that emerged in my research. Thus the purpose of this interview was to gain insight about what I had learned so far through my participants and their gameplay. I prepared open-ended interview questions based on the data I gathered and like the preliminary interviews, I maintained a certain level of flexibility that enabled me to pursue other issues that emerged during the interview. These questions sought to affirm or disprove my research findings. As well, I provided my participants with an overview of my most significant findings so that I could get their insight on my data. This strengthened the collaborative relationship between my participants and me by providing an opportunity to review the findings together and deepen our understanding of gameplay in relation to important meaning-making practices by thickening the descriptions together. This was especially important for understanding the various levels of meaning making in relation to their perspectives on the importance of gaming, and my own evaluation of their gaming practices through a participatory culture. It seems that this was a valuable experience for my participants as some of them expressed that they
had learned something about themselves and their gameplay in relation to larger issues of identity work and social relationships.

My research procedure with Jan slightly differed than my other three participants because he was added much later in my research process. I first learned about Jan from TNT, as she often mentioned him during the preliminary interview and observation sessions. Based on what TNT had told me, Jan seemed to exemplify the ‘messing around’ genres of gameplay in Minecraft that I was interested to learn more about. Moreover, the relationship between Jan and TNT was unique to the rest of my participants in that playing Minecraft was a significant means of socializing for them. I wanted to know what kinds of practices took place in Minecraft and how that affected their relationship and their identities. To do this, I conducted a preliminary interview with Jan at the Fraser Library at SFU Surrey with the same purpose as all my other preliminary interviews: to understand how Jan articulated the role of gaming in his everyday life. Then I conducted one two-hour observation session with him in his home, which was followed by two in-game, two-hour virtual observation sessions of Jan and TNT playing together\textsuperscript{11}. They were given the option of playing on a map\textsuperscript{12} that they had already started or starting an entirely new map. The first observation session began with playing in a new map and then showing me an older map they had been playing on.

The second observation session was in the same older map that they had played in during the first session. Unlike my other observation sessions, this one was done in a virtual setting which allowed me to experience and observe how my participants constructed Minecraft as a social space and played Minecraft as a form of sociality. Since I was interested in understanding the social dynamics between TNT and Jan in

\textsuperscript{11} TNT gave me her verbal consent to agree to participate in these additional observation sessions.

\textsuperscript{12} A map in Minecraft is a saved game world that players can play alone or with others through hosted servers. In this case, the different maps that Jan and TNT showed me were in servers hosted by TNT and accessed through invitation only. A map is either generated by the game or are designed by other players and shared with one another. They can also be customized by selecting various options like flat landscapes, large biomes, or presence of structures like villages.
relation to gaming practices, I employed virtual participant observations as a way to triangulate my previous findings by actually having firsthand experience of what my participants were doing on Minecraft through my own participation. I think that the intersubjectivity of meaning making through gameplay required observing my participants interacting with one another within an online context. As Tedlock (2000) argues, since meaning is created through “multiple strata of reality” (p. 471), conducting observation sessions in both offline and online contexts enabled me to gain a richer understanding of how meaning and authenticity is generated within and between these two spaces.

Lastly, I conducted a final interview as a group interview with Jan and TNT after I had reviewed my field notes from the online observations. The goal of this final interview was to gain insight on how Minecraft has played a role in TNT and Jan’s relationship. Interviewing them together proved to be a valuable methodological approach for several reasons: 1) The participants were much more talkative and enthusiastic to share their experiences with me when the other was there; 2) the participants fed off each other’s responses and were able to articulate a very detailed and reflective account of how Minecraft has affected their relationship; and 3) the participants provided insight about each other that may have been difficult to recognize about themselves. But while this approach was useful, there were also some challenges I encountered. I found that because TNT and Jan were such good friends, there was a tendency to go off-topic so I needed to be mindful of returning the topic at-hand in a respectful manner. I also acknowledge that individual responses would be affected by the presence of others, especially if it is a close friend. But my findings from the one-on-one interviews and observation sessions will help to strengthen the validity of my group interview data.

3.4.3. Data Analysis

Ultimately, the purpose of my data analysis was to better understand the diverse range of gaming practices that my participants took up by leveraging the affordances of Minecraft to suit their personal needs and goals. In doing so, I hoped to illustrate how gaming can be a meaningful entry point to a participatory culture through sociality, identity work, and informal learning. The data I analyzed included interview transcripts, audio recordings, digital recordings of virtual observations, and field notes. I approached
the analysis in two ways: through deductive coding based on Ito and Bittanti’s (2010) five genres of gaming, and through descriptive coding that identified how certain gaming practices produced meaningful experiences to my participants. I conducted the first round of coding based on the five genres of gaming during the research process, while simultaneously noting any meaningful experiences that emerged. Then I conducted my second round of analysis after I had completed my interviews and observations, based on the descriptive coding that I developed during the deductive coding stage.

Ito and Bittanti’s (2010) genres of gaming: 1) killing time; 2) hanging out; 3) recreational gaming; 4) organizing and mobilizing; and 5) augmented gameplay, provide a descriptive framework for identifying and interpreting what kinds of gaming practices my participants were doing, depending on context and needs. Since Ito and Bittanti argue that the genre of the game does not necessarily dictate the genre of gaming, this was a valuable framework to use for deductive coding because I could observe how diverse the range of gaming practices in Minecraft were. To do this, I noted experiences, practices, and utterances that represented each type of gaming genre. For example, for the code “organizing and mobilizing”, I noted instances where my participants mentioned ‘geek’ or ‘gamer’ as a way of articulating more committed levels of gameplay beyond sociality and into more geeking out forms of gaming associated with the gamer identity. For the code, “hanging out”, I noted any instances where my participants expressed or illustrated the prioritization of sociality over any other elements of gaming. But if sociality was mentioned in the context of supplementing or augmenting their gameplay experience through learning or collaboration, I coded that under “recreational gaming”. By using Ito and Bittanti’s genres of gaming, my goal was to explore the diversity of gaming practices in Minecraft to better understand how players assert their agency by leveraging and manipulating gaming to suit their needs.

After the first round of coding based on the five genres of gaming, I further analyzed my data by looking at what kinds of meaningful practices and experiences emerged from the specific types of gaming my participants took up. In other words, what I had done so far is identify how they are gaming and so the second round of coding was to understand what they were getting out of gaming. Referring back to the idea of ‘meaningfulness’, the descriptive coding enabled me to identify ways in which my participants were finding meaning through competencies and experiences enabled
through a participatory culture. This conceptualization of meaningfulness was not necessarily explicitly expressed by my participants, but was evaluated through descriptive coding. I developed coding that identified meaningful experiences around sociality, use of networks, identity, learning, and gender as these seemed to be the most predominant themes that emerged in my findings. For example, I noted that MC949 took up elements of recreational gaming based on his deep interest and expertise in Minecraft but due to various barriers, sociality through Minecraft actually took place outside of the game in online Minecraft communities, his relationship with his brothers, and on the playground with his friend. Identifying the types of gaming that my participants took up only addressed a small portion of how gaming enabled meaningful practices. Descriptive coding allowed me to illuminate what constituted meaningfulness to my participants in the context of gaming.

3.5. Minecraft

What seems to make Minecraft so appealing is that it is often viewed as a “gaming platform” (Duncan, 2011, p. 2). The game propels different forms of play, giving players the freedom to do what they want with the game. They can explore, fight and survive, or create, share, and build. This is further supported by a notable absence of tutorials and instructions. Instead, the game relies on players to teach themselves and each other the various possibilities of how to play the game, since there is not one way of playing. Many players proudly share advice and their creations through YouTube videos and even generate fandom of their own, such as YouTube user CaptainSparklez. Other sites like Minecraft Forum and Minecraft Wiki are part of official list of resources, but are largely generated and maintained by players. It also provides space for fans to communicate with one another and share resources. Quite often, fans use Minecraft Forum to allow other fans to download character skins, mods or maps that they have created. There are also numerous unofficial Minecraft sites such as MinecraftDL.com and Minecraftmaps.com that offer similar spaces for exchange. In this way, Minecraft operates as a platform because players are given the freedom to create additional ‘layers’ of game design and aesthetic through player-generated features like skins, mods, and maps. As such, its original form is like a blank canvas: inviting players to add layers and meaning to its game based on their goals and interests.
The terms of use of Minecraft are relatively open which helps enable players to be able to use Minecraft as a platform. It simply states:

If you've bought the game, you may play around with it and modify it. We'd appreciate it if you didn't use this for griefing\(^{13}\), though, and remember not to distribute the changed versions of our software. Basically, mods (or plugins, or tools) are cool (you can distribute those), hacked versions of the Minecraft client or server are not (you can't distribute those). (Minecraft - Terms of Use, 2010)

In other words, player-generated tools are acknowledged as the property of the player, which means that they can distribute and share as much as they want, so long as it is not for commercial use (unless officially authorized by Mojang). This kind of openness is similar to Benkler’s (2006) notion of “commons-based peer production” that illuminates the potential of decentralized, collaborative forms of production to enable the creation and exchange of ideas and resources not bound by proprietary or market terms. Minecraft is fundamentally dependent on the exchange of information by its players, especially as the game is increasingly viewed as a platform for other meaningful practices in additional to the intended forms of gameplay.

Perrson’s (the creator of Minecraft) philosophy on Minecraft’s development is succinctly illustrated by his statement: “Waterfall is dead, long live agile!” (Minecraft - About the game, n.d.). According to Duncan (2011), Perrson rejects a “waterfall model” of software development that is characterized by “relatively-rigid stages...without the flexibility to create an appropriate solution to a changing problem or changing needs of the software’s users” (p. 8). Instead, he supports a model of “agile software development” that strongly depends on a collaborative approach with users that enables ongoing changes to answer to changes in user needs (ibid.). As such, Minecraft’s model of development is largely indicative of this collaborative, agile approach. Perrson allowed players access to the game at the early stages of the game’s development, which

\(^{13}\) Griefing refers to the practice of harassing other players in a game. This can include practices like insulting people, or playing the game in unintentional and bothersome ways like stealing or destroying online creations.
enabled him to leverage their play as a way to test out the game’s design. He also kept in direct contact with them through Twitter (@Notch) and Tumblr (‘The Word of Notch’), where he could stay up-to-date with players on updates and changes, and to receive feedback and requests from players. For example, he has posted several Q&A blog posts on his Tumblr that have provided fans with detailed information regarding the game’s design, aesthetic, and mechanics:

Q: When is survival mode multiplayer coming?
A: I have no idea, sorry. I can tell you the development schedule, though:

1. The inventory screen. (I will get this done this year, so help me Derek)
2. Crafting of inventory items
3. New server for creative mode, with anti-hack protection and updated protocol that uses slightly less bandwidth.
4. New creative client that uses the new models and such.
5. Survival mode multiplayer test
6. Survival mode

(“Some feedback on the feedback, and a picture of me: The Word of Notch”, December 29, 2009)

This type of collaboration allowed players to directly connect with the game developer and play a significant role on the actual outcome of the game design, vastly different than corporate game developers who communicate with fans through faceless Twitter handles or official press releases. This notably more intimate relationship between Perrson and the players indicates a symbiotic relationship that fosters a growing sense of collaboration and an acknowledgment of the importance of bottom-up participation. As such, it challenges older notions of top-down, proprietary production and empowers players to be able to have a voice in the production and exchange of ideas.

3.6. **Conclusion**

Minecraft proved to be an interesting site of inquiry. The open-ended nature of the game offered creative openings that enabled a diversity of gaming practices that reflected the unique needs of my participants. Each participant demonstrated distinct gaming practices that were driven by different needs. TNT exemplified how gaming was a way for her to be creative, work collaboratively, and socialize with Jan and their other
friends. But her gameplay was also further complicated by issues of gender that affected how she defined legitimate gaming, while at the same time, her identification with the gamer identity offers insight on what it means to be a ‘girl gamer’. Carlito revealed the deeply social aspect of gaming whereby Minecraft served as both a space and an activity for sociality. His commitment to the game was far less intense than TNT and yet Minecraft still offered other ways for meaningful practices to take place. Jan, who also identified himself as a gamer, revealed the importance of collaboration and learning in his gameplay. While his commitment to Minecraft was indisputable, he seemed to be much more driven by the desire for sociality than TNT. Lastly, MC949 provided unique insight into how gaming can be manipulated around issues of accessibility and technical expertise to suit his needs in relation to sociality and learning.

Critical ethnography proved to be a useful methodological approach because of its emphasis on what is happening “on the ground”; that is, in the case of this research, the everyday lives of my participants (Madison, 2005, p. 5). Understanding gaming from the perspective of gamers themselves in relation to meaning making and participatory cultures, offers the potential of “what could be” if we challenge the notion that young people are simply passive consumers in an increasingly capitalist-driven society (Thomas, 1993, p. 4). It offers an alternative perspective to understanding the complex relationship between top-down consumer culture and bottom-up participatory culture that recognizes the agency of consumer/players within the structures of capitalism.

Having said that, the gaming practices and meaningful experiences that I observed were not necessarily revolutionary in nature, nor did my participants ever seem to feel particularly oppressed by (or even conscious of) the structure of the capitalist paradigm. The goal of critical ethnography seeks to empower its informants by way of “emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice” which did not quite fit with my findings (Madison, 2005, p. 5). Aspects of social justice and emancipation are not a predominant issue in the context of my research. Instead, the importance of gaming to my participants were much more mundane in nature and yet, I argue that the meaning-making practices that emerged through gaming do point to “what could be”. In other words, while the language of emancipation and repression do not accurately portray the conditions in which my informants are gaming in, it offers a useful perspective in emphasizing the bottom-up forms of participation and meaning making. Mundane
gaming practices are still meaningful to my participants and have deep implications for the growing importance of participatory culture. As such, I argue that through the lens of critical ethnography, it is essential that we recognize that meaningful experiences take place in the everyday and should not be ignored in the context of an intensifying consumer culture. Thus it is my hope that through rigorous qualitative analysis of my participants’ experiences in and through Minecraft, I have been able to shed light on the intricacies of gaming and its various effects on their everyday lives.
4. Research Findings: Understanding the Agentic Potential of Gaming

4.1. Introduction

As I began this research project, my original research question: ‘How does Minecraft illustrate the potential of peer production and the wealth of networks?’ sought to understand how online networks contributed to young people’s practices of cultural and knowledge production through participatory media. But through ethnographic inquiry, I quickly realized that my conceptualization of networks was limited and short sighted. While I was hoping to observe an abundance of instances where my participants used third party sites like YouTube to exchange ideas with other players, it seemed that this practice was not as significant as I thought. Instead, my participants leveraged the online networking and creative affordances of Minecraft to take up meaningful practices in their everyday lives that often meant blurring the lines between online and offline identities and lifeworlds. Consequently, my research purpose needed to evolve in order to account for these unexpected conceptualizations of networks, particularly in relation to sociality and identity formation.

The following chapter will examine how I applied a critical ethnographic approach to uncover the various ways that my participants took up meaningful media practices in and through Minecraft. The trajectory of how my research unfolded and developed over the course of the preliminary interviews, participant observations, and final interviews is important for understanding my participants’ use of Minecraft in relation to meaning making, gameplay, and agency. Each stage of my research enabled different ways to uncover valuable insights into how my participants developed and exhibited an emerging form of agency within the realm of online gaming. As such, this chapter is separated into four sections. The first section will outline my findings from my preliminary interviews. The purpose of this section is to reveal how the scope of my research had to change in response to the unanticipated ways that my participants used the social networking and
creative openings of Minecraft in ways that blurred their online and offline worlds. As well, the preliminary interviews gave me the opportunity to assess what modes of gaming that my participants seemed to practice. The second section will outline my findings from the observations, including my virtual observations. The purpose of this is to describe the gaming practices that I observed in an effort to provide a framework that illustrates the diversity of practices and competencies that emerge through gaming. The third section will outline the findings from my final interviews. The collaborative approach that I adopted in my methodologies allowed me to share and further develop my findings with my participants. It was at this stage of my research that I was able to fully understand the scope of my participants’ relationship with Minecraft and how it has affected their lives. The final section will provide a more detailed analysis of my findings in relation to how my participants exhibited meaningful forms of participation through gaming in Minecraft and more specifically, that agency can exist within the structure of a neoliberal network society.

4.2. Preliminary Interviews

My own experiences with Minecraft illuminated the role that online communities had in augmenting gameplay through vast networks of information exchange in official and unofficial online spaces. The relatively open nature of Minecraft seemed to allow for unique and bottom-up participatory practices and so I began my interviews with the goal of better understanding how online Minecraft communities augmented my participants’ gameplay too. My goal revealed an underlying assumption that what made Minecraft valuable and unique to me would be the same for my participants. My preliminary interviews challenged this assumption and as such, it became remarkably clear that Minecraft was unique in its value and meaning for each participant, depending on context, practice, and subjectivities.

4.2.1. Affordances of Minecraft

Throughout all of my preliminary interviews, what stood out was that all my participants expressed the creative possibilities that Minecraft offers. These are realized in different ways, but the potential for creativity in an open-ended game like Minecraft
seems to make it possible for my participants to be able to experiment and play in meaningful ways. For TNT, Minecraft’s fantastical elements are what offer the potential of seemingly limitless creative opportunities. When I asked what first drew her to Minecraft, she pointed to the fantastical and imaginative possibilities that the game offered:

Interviewer: How did you start playing [Minecraft]?
TNT: My friends told me about it and at first, it didn’t sound very interesting because all you do is build whatever you want. And they just said you break blocks and just build whatever you want. And someone told me that they built a house floating in the middle of nowhere and it had lava coming down and I was like, “Whoa, okay” and I had to give it a try.

Interviewer: Why did that interest you? The floating house and the lava...
TNT: ’Cause he said doing that he couldn’t get the monsters to come up. And I was like, “There’s monsters?!” And he’s like, “Yeah, monsters come out at night so you have to build a shelter.” So I was like, “Whoa, okay. I’ll give that a try.” [...] it’s just so open-ended. You do whatever you want. I mean, trees don’t fall! Trees don’t fall!

The idea of floating houses, strategically placed lava, monsters, and trees that don’t fall represent limitless possibilities in what she can create and do in Minecraft. The possibility to build came secondary to the possibility that she could build however and wherever she wanted. She is not bound by real-life logistics or rules, but only by her own imagination.

For Carlito and MC949, the open-ended narrative of the game is what seemed to offer the potential to be creative. For example, when I asked Carlito what motivated him to continue playing Minecraft, he explained that one of the reasons was that the game has “no ultimate goal” and instead, players decide how and why they play. He explains:

...It was collaborative and I like the aspect of being creative, of doing whatever you want...I guess the whole point of playing Minecraft is because you can work towards doing something. Work towards whatever you want to.
The possibility to be able to “work towards whatever you want to” offers the opportunity for Carlito to be creative and experiment without being confined to prescribed narratives or gameplay. Similar to TNT, Carlito expresses the possibility to do anything, which he attributes to the opportunity of choosing his own goals and motivations in the game. Similarly, MC949 explained that one of the strengths of Minecraft is that “everything is unlimited, except survival [mode].” In Halo there isn’t, in Dungeon Defenders there isn’t.” He seems to be suggesting that resources, ideas, and possibilities are unlimited in Minecraft because of how open-ended it is. This is also evident in the number of descriptions he provided of his numerous creative endeavours in the game: a house built with sand, roller coasters, trap doors, and vending machines. He also compares Minecraft to other games that he has played to suggest that it is somehow unique in how it offers “unlimited” opportunities for creativity. Both Carlito and MC949 are drawn to the creative openings that are offered in Minecraft and more specifically, in how open-ended it is in enabling and fostering such creativity.

In a similar vein, when I asked what drew Jan to Minecraft, he explains:

It was a... some sort of expression that you could put through into the game, like whereas with other games you could have to follow their storyline or you have to follow the character of the main protagonist. Whereas you can be yourself, you can hang out with your friends, you don’t have to oblige yourself to a specific task or you don’t have to oblige yourself to specific roles of society.

This illuminates how the open-ended nature of Minecraft not only makes possible opportunities for creative and imaginative play, but also offers the potential for important identity work. In Jan’s case, Minecraft does not require the adoption of an avatar or a distinct online persona, but instead its creative openings function as opportunities to extend one’s offline identity in a shared, online space. Jan goes on to explain:

Compared to other online games, where you have to put on this bad ass personality—like a persona—with Minecraft, you don’t really have...

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14 In survival mode, players have to mine and acquire resources whereas in creative mode, players are given an unlimited supply of resources.
to do that because there’s no real competition to it. It’s more about cooperation.

The common agonistic characteristics of online avatars in most games foster machismo competition, but Jan argues that Minecraft fosters “cooperation” that enables him to be comfortable with his identity and not feel obligated to follow certain expectations commonly associated with hyper-masculine gaming culture. This also potentially reveals that the discomfort and alienation of male gendered gaming may similarly affect male gamers. Perhaps for Jan, Minecraft’s premise of creativity possibly offers a relatively more neutral form of gameplay compared to other online games by encouraging cooperation instead of antagonistic competition.

### 4.2.2. Genres of Gaming

My participants illustrated a wide range of gaming genres that depended on context, goals, and interests. They ranged from hanging out to more committed forms of gaming like mobilized and organized gaming, which point to the diversity of gaming practices that constitute the participatory culture of new media in relation to young people (Ito & Bittanti, 2010). But these various gaming practices emerge, not from deliberate, conscious choices but rather, from organic, fluid transitions from one to another in ways that reflect the diversity of social and cultural ecologies that contextualize gaming practices. Thus, to label a certain genre of game or type of gamer with a single form of gaming ignores how multilayered and complex gaming really is.

TNT and Jan seem to predominantly practice recreational gaming, though I suspected that perhaps I would see more organized forms of gameplay during the observations based on the distinct roles that each one had. While sociality is an important component to their gameplay, it is not solely for the purpose of hanging out and spending time with friends, but rather to share ideas, work together, and learn from one another:

**TNT:** [...]

With multiplayer, you always have a person, like you can tell them: “Can you build the interior?” and you know, they would go and make something really nice that you haven’t really imagined. In single player, you’re just limited to your own imagination.
Interviewer: So is it important for you to collaborate with other people?

TNT: Yeah. If you’re just playing alone, you’re – like I said before – you’re just limited to your own imagination, but then as you continue watching other people and looking at their work, you keep thinking more and more differently. It’s like learning. You learn one thing; you try, and think differently. So, I guess in a way it opens your mind too.

In other words, playing Minecraft is a social practice for TNT but the impetus for this social practice is for peer-based learning that Ito and Bittanti (2010) describe as indicative of recreational gaming practices. In my interview with Jan, he describes the collaborative and organized nature of his gameplay with TNT:

We like to build stuff. We like to build really elaborate structures like [TNT], she just recently built a cathedral and we blew that up. We like to build mansions and anything that comes to our mind. The hotel that we’re building, we talked about it and I said, “We should build a hotel that trumps that hotel in Dubai.” So that’s where we came up with the idea. We like to build to see the limits of what we can do and what we can achieve: From going from a simple one room like this to a nice master bedroom with a full bathroom and all that.

Jan’s description suggests that when he and TNT play together, their gameplay is largely organized and collaborative. Their goals are determined collectively and they pursue those goals together. Collaborative gameplay in Minecraft seem to inspire them to consider potentially new ways of thinking and creating, beyond the limitations of their own imaginations.

Carlito’s gameplay seems to easily transition between hanging out and recreational gaming depending on the context of their play. He primarily plays with two other friends, which suggests that co-presence is important to his gameplay. But despite the importance of co-presence, his explanations of their gameplay reveal that Carlito and his friends move fluidly between being together and playing together on Minecraft. What I mean by ‘being together’ is that Carlito and his friends will sometimes take on individual projects, despite playing in multiplayer. For example, he explains how they begin a new map:
We’ll usually start with one house for the three of us and then we each build whatever we want and so I usually... I don’t know. I just like building stuff. Whatever it is.

In this case, they begin a map with a shared goal of building a house but once that is accomplished, they start their own projects of building “whatever [they] want”, without having to adhere to a collective plan or goal. They seem largely motivated by their own desire to create and explore. But despite this, sociality remains an important part of their gameplay. Social bonding still occurs through conversations enabled by Skype voice chat:

Um, it’s fun. [laughs] It’s...do whatever you want. Sometimes we’re not even doing anything on Minecraft. We’re on Skype talking and then we’re just building random stuff on Minecraft, like screwing around the carts and stuff. It’s kind of like a virtual hang out place... kind of like, I remember Habbo Hotel use to be popular. People kind of just walk around and don’t do anything.

His admission that “sometimes we’re not even doing anything” suggests that playing Minecraft is not always necessarily motivated by extrinsic goals like creating large-scale buildings, but rather spending time together through a shared social space. As such, in this case, hanging out seems to be an important mode of gaming for Carlito.

At other times, it seems that Carlito and his friends move towards more organized forms of play where collaboration is an important component to their gameplay:

I find that when you play multiplayer, you have someone to talk to and if you guys are working on the same thing, it’s a lot faster to get something done, especially when you first start out in survival mode. It’s a lot easier with a friend because then you always need two resources. You need wood and you need coal, right? Those are always the two things you need so usually what we do is, I’ll always chop down trees until we have a couple of stacks of wood and my friend goes and gets coal.

It is in these kinds of instances where I would describe them as ‘playing together’ because they are working towards a collective goal and as such, gaming moves from just hanging out to recreational gaming since the social configuration of their gameplay enables more organized, collaborative gaming practices. Carlito’s relationship with
Minecraft and the genres of gaming that emerge are perfectly encapsulated by his description of the game as an “infinite playground that requires less effort to play”. Like a playground, he can hang out and play with his friends, but also take up his own individual activities and goals too.

My interview with MC949 revealed the complexities of gameplay in relation to social and technical competencies and access. The gaming genres that Ito and Bittanti (2010) outline did not adequately describe MC949’s gameplay. As a nine-year-old, his access to computers and software are much limited than my other participants. He has to use family members’ computers and frequently relies on his older brothers to download software and to assist him with technical problems. He only has one other friend that plays Minecraft but due to their lack of technical knowledge and limited access to a computer, they are unable to set up and run an online server. As such, his gaming practices are limited and largely depend on his brothers. The sociality seen with my other participants was not present here because he is unable to play with others online and instead, Minecraft offers a proto-sociality that highlights a burgeoning social identity and practice as a result of his gaming. In other words, playing in Minecraft is not an isolated activity but requires him to rely on his relationships with his brothers. Unlike my other participants whose gameplay relied on sociality in Minecraft as a shared social space and as a social activity, MC949’s sociality through Minecraft takes place outside the online space and extends to his offline relationships with his brothers:

Interviewer: Do you ever like to share some of the things you’ve made?
MC949: No. I barely have people to send it to.

Interviewer: So you don’t have a lot of friends that play Minecraft?
MC949: Mm mm. [shakes head to indicate no]

Interviewer: So do you like to show your brother?
MC949: Yeah, I tell him...on the phone.

Similarly, he also briefly mentions that he often ‘plays Minecraft’ with his friends at school by pretending to be in Minecraft. For example, he explains that they pretend to have a pick and mine for resources on the playground. Though he is unable to play online with his friend, Minecraft remains a converging point for sociality in their offline interactions.
Minecraft also offers a proto-sociality for MC949 in ways that enable him to overcome the technical barriers of gaming while also fulfilling social and personal needs. Despite the different ways in which sociality is realized for MC949, he seems to take up certain aspects of recreational gaming that Ito and Bittanti (2010) describe. According to the authors, recreational gaming “[requires] persistent engagement to master” (p. 210) and “honoring of expertise” (p. 213). Throughout the interview, MC949 provided numerous descriptions of his various projects and creations on Minecraft like an “automatic building defense wall”. He also explained that if a computer is unavailable, he often uses his brother’s phone to play Minecraft. His persistent and consistent gaming despite the barriers of access and knowledge, as well as his enthusiastic and elaborate projects reveal that playing Minecraft is more than just to kill time, but is genuinely an important hobby or recreation.

4.3. Participant Observation Findings

4.3.1. Carlito

My ethical obligations restricted my participants to play in single player, which seemed to be a significant restriction for Carlito’s gameplay. The preliminary interview revealed Carlito’s gameplay consisted primarily of hanging out with some instances of recreational gaming and a strong dependence on co-presence. This was especially apparent in my observations with him. Being limited to single player proved to be a challenge. He seemed unsure of what he should be doing and as a result, our time together was largely spent with him showing me his past and present projects rather than actually playing.

For the first session, Carlito began a new single player map in creative mode and began building a structure out of glass. He explained that he rarely plays single player and so he did not have an ongoing single player map to share with me. At one point in the beginning of our session, he messaged his friend on Skype to open the server to allow him to play in the multiplayer map he plays on (without the presence of his friends) but unfortunately his friend was not available to answer his request. There seemed to be a level of discomfort in creating and playing a new map in single player, which
suggested that perhaps my asking him to play in this way was not comfortable for him. He continued working on his glasshouse, downloading a few texture packs that would allow him to change the appearance of the glass to better suit him. Despite a slow start, he became increasingly more committed to this project, which I determined based on the very specific aesthetic choices he made in his design. His gameplay resembled the recreational gaming genre because of his level of commitment and interest in the gameplay. He appeared to be genuinely concerned with the design of his structure, going to great lengths to find a texture pack suitable for what he had envisioned. When I asked him how he would know when the building is completed, he explained:

Carlito: ...I mean as long as it looks nice in the end. I don’t think I’m going to ever finish this. I’m just going to keep adding to it until it gets bigger and bigger. That’s kind of the idea. As I finished each part, I just want it to look nice, right?

Interviewer: So when will you decide it’s nice enough to stop?
Carlito: When I get bored, I’ll just keep going until I get bored of it.

This reveals that his gameplay is motivated, not by the end product of a completed glass structure, but by the actual experience of creating something. But even though he seems to enjoy playing Minecraft in this way, he repeatedly stated throughout this session that he usually plays in multiplayer with his friends, which made me question whether recreational gaming is a primary form of gaming for him. I also began to question why co-presence was so important for his gameplay.

For the second session, Carlito was able to gain access to the multiplayer map that he shares with his friends. The majority of time spent during this session was Carlito showing me what he and his friends were working on together, and what he was planning to do in the future. He seemed much more at ease in showing me this map than when he was playing in a single player map during the first session. Many of the creations he showed me were his personal projects that he had been working on by himself, despite playing in a multiplayer server. This revealed how much more he prefers playing Minecraft with his friends than alone. When I asked him if he primarily played for social reasons rather than for gameplay, he explained:
Yeah, I guess so. That’s a good way to put it because that’s definitely, mostly the reason why I play games. I don’t like playing by myself too much unless there’s a really good storyline to it and even then, it’s kind of... I’d rather have someone there. If I wanted a story, I’d read a book or something [laughs]. [...] Because I don’t play just for the sake of playing, and I don’t always have a drive to level up or get to the next level. It’d be nice and if my friends are doing it, then I’ll keep playing but it’s never by achievement, kind of thing. [...] I mean I’ll play when someone’s playing so that I have someone to talk to. I mean all I’m doing is something like this—just building stuff and talking to them without actually playing the game.

Carlito clearly demonstrates that playing Minecraft (and other games) primarily serves a social rather than a recreational purpose. The goal-oriented activities on Minecraft—whether it is exploring caves together or building structures—become a site for social activity and exchange. Despite moments when he works on projects by himself, his preference to play with his friends reveals that those creative openings are primarily for social bonding. The friendship-driven sociality that motivates his gaming practices is further emphasized when he describes his activities as “building stuff and talking to [his friends]” and dismisses those activities as not authentic gameplay.

The importance of co-presence also emphasizes how Minecraft allows Carlito to be able to play with his friends, despite a difference in gaming expertise. In both sessions, Carlito seemed unsure of his ability to play, especially compared to his friends. For example:

Interviewer: Do you ever use redstone or sticky pistons? 15
Carlito: Not sticky pistons because it’s really hard to get slimeballs. I’m not so good with...I know how to use it a little bit but both my other friends are studying computer science and so they’re the guys that do that. [laughs] And it makes me feel like an idiot when I try to do that because I don’t know anything. It’s like circuitry, right?

15 Sticky pistons are a mechanical tool that pulls or pushes (in the case of regular pistons) a block directly adjacent to it and redstone is frequently used with other features to mimic circuitry.
This is only one example of numerous moments where he acknowledges the stronger abilities of his friends to play the game compared to his own. Referring to them as “the guys that do that” suggests that he regards them as the ones to tackle the more difficult challenges in Minecraft, while he often takes up ‘lighter’ roles such as staying behind to maintain their ‘home base’. Furthermore, I also sensed a lack of confidence in his creativity:

Carlito: I think [the structure] looks pretty cool. I don’t know if it’s actually cool or not. It’s similar to the other one—the tunnel/cave/whatever—it’s kind of like that. […]

Interview: It is cool.

Carlito: Yeah...eventually it kind of layers and layers and it goes really deep. The idea is that I keep going down and down and so each time I stop, it’s another layer. I don’t know... I think it looks cool.

In the example above, he repeatedly stresses the ‘I’ in his statements by emphasizing that he believes his structure is cool rather than describing the structure in more definitive terms (i.e. ‘I think the structure is cool’ versus ‘the structure is cool’). In doing so, he avoids any challenges to the quality of his design. Furthermore, he also identifies his friends as gamers and by comparison, he identifies himself as a non-gamer because he plays primarily for social reasons:

Interviewer: How would you describe a real gamer then?

Carlito: I guess someone who plays more than me, I guess frequency is part of it but also they play because they really like to play it. I play because it’s fun but I prefer to play with friends. It’s kind of like hanging out with my friends without having to leave my house.

The hanging out genre that best describes Carlito is most often seen in games that “bridge different forms of gaming expertise” (Ito and Bittanti, 2010, p. 207). Minecraft seems to offer that by providing Carlito a site for sociality despite the perceived difference in gaming commitment and expertise.

4.3.2. TNT and Jan

I had the opportunity to observe TNT and Jan in two different contexts: single player and multiplayer. In both contexts, their gameplay illustrated gaming practices that
were much more committed than casual gaming. In single player, their gaming practices were best described as recreational gaming. Ito and Bittanti’s (2010) definition of this genre places importance on interest-driven sociality. However, in a single player context, sociality was clearly not a factor but both participants still displayed engaged commitment that regarded gaming as a genuine hobby. Ito and Bittanti argue that recreational gaming is a practice whereby “people [are] gaming to game” (p. 210) with a “focus for the development of identities of expertise, performance, and virtuosity” (p. 213), which were evident in my observations of both participants. In multiplayer, TNT and Jan displayed more geeked out practices of gaming through a more organized and hierarchical social configuration, as well as a deeper level of commitment in terms of their time and expertise. The leveraging of collective intelligence through social exchanges seems to stimulate a more engaged gaming practice that I did not see in single player.

TNT preferred to play in survival mode during our sessions. In the first session, she began a new map after careful and lengthy consideration based on very specific requirements:

...a mountain, and a cave...a cave of the right size. It can’t be too big. It can’t be confusing. It can’t be too short. And a cave has to have a nice surrounding area... [with] scenery and practicality in terms of getting trees and resources.

Once she found a suitable map, she explored the terrain and finally settled on a location to start building her ‘home base’. Her articulation of very specific preferences reveals a committed level of gameplay because it shows that she understands what her goals are and the environment she needs to achieve those goals. In the second session, she continued playing on a similar map\textsuperscript{16} and had made significant progress. She had built an elaborate home with a fruitful farm and had established a working and trading

\textsuperscript{16} This map was similar to the one she had started during our first session. Her computer crashed a few days after our first session and the older map was corrupted. As a result, she began a new map that was similar in terrain and recreated what she had been working on before.
relationship with the NPC villagers through the Millenaire mod (see Figure 1). She had even established a ‘daily’ routine, which she repeated several times throughout our session: wake up, collect watermelons, explore world and visit NPC villages, return home and redistribute resources, check livestock, check crops, and go to bed. At first, this routine seemed mundane and banal, but her habitual dedication to accomplishing these tasks revealed a keen interest and commitment to sustain an online space and life that she had created. This revealed that playing Minecraft in this way was far more than just to kill time or procrastinate. Instead, TNT demonstrated a gameplay that had a ritualistic element, which suggested a deeper relationship to the game.

*Figure 1: TNT’s Underground Farm*

In Jan’s session, he spent the entire time working on a mansion that he had started the night before our meeting. It was an impressive large-scale structure that was

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17 Minecraft has a day/night cycle that spans 20 minutes.
very detailed in its design and aesthetic (see figure 2). When I asked him to describe what he was doing, he explained:

I started this yesterday before I went out with my friends, just to kill some time. I thought of how square everything is, how in Minecraft all you can do is create things that are square—houses and all that. So I was trying to build curves and all that. So this is kind of an experiment of what I can do because in our server, with [TNT] and all our other friends, we’re creating different sections of a city so I’m just pitching some ideas of what some highrise mansions can be like.

This demonstrates a critical engagement with the game by identifying the game’s limitations (“all you can do is create things that are square”) and work to overcome them. In doing so, he is also honing his skills to be able to contribute more to the collaborative projects that he works on with his friends in multiplayer. Furthermore, Minecraft also serves as a place for him to engage in playful experimentation by being able to create an imagined world:

Interviewer: Where do you normally get ideas from?
Jan: Um, anything that’s been happening recently. Like last night, before I was playing this, I knew my friends and I were going to watch the Avengers so I just thought what other Marvel movies have we watched? So the Hulk, Iron Man... I was just imagining that I was some playboy millionaire and what house I would like. So anything pretty recently.

The mansion was not only a way for him to develop his skills and experiment with ideas, but it was also a way for him to engage in imaginative play by negotiating his real-world identity with a projective identity of a “playboy millionaire”. Creating this mansion represents both an interest-driven pursuit and valuable identity work. As such, his gaming practices are best described as recreational gaming because his gameplay is motivated by a sense of intrinsic purpose.
Despite the comfort and enjoyment of playing in single player, both explicitly acknowledge the importance of the other in their gaming practices—not for social reasons but for collaborative purposes. During one of TNT’s sessions, she played for a short time in a multiplayer map she shares with Jan. In this map, they were in the process of building a large hotel. But without Jan present, TNT was hesitant to make significant decisions without consulting Jan:

**Interviewer:** Are you going to add a third floor?

**TNT:** I might, eventually. I’ll work on something else. I’ll discuss it with my friend later. [...] I think I’ll just talk with him, this Saturday maybe... because that’s when we usually play.

Their relationship in Minecraft seems more like a partnership rather than a friendship because of how much they rely on each other in terms of making design decisions. Similarly, Jan also acknowledges how their gameplay complement each other. He identifies his talents and interests in comparison to TNT to suggest that their gameplay has different focuses, which enable them to work better together:

**Jan:** [Building a mansion] is usually [TNT’s] department so this is something new for me. But recently, I built City Hall and it went pretty well.
Interviewer: How come you don’t normally do the structural designs?

Jan: I don’t know. I just... I like interior design more often. But it’s just the tediousness of it. If you know you want to build something really extravagant, you know you have to dedicate your time to it and maybe you don’t have 6 hours to do that. And preferably you want to finish it in one sitting. [...] 

Interviewer: Do you ever play around with the sticky pistons and stuff like that?

Jan: It’s more [TNT’s] thing because I get really confused by redstone. “I’ll just build the simple stuff and you do the fancy things…”

But similar to Carlito, Jan belittles his abilities in comparison to TNT by describing his activities as “simple” whereas TNT’s is “fancy”. But unlike Carlito, Jan still recognizes and acknowledges where his strengths lie: interior design, as well as his ability to create larger structures if he wanted to. As such, this exchange reveals that Jan is able to distinguish his strengths and weaknesses in relation to TNT’s, which indicates that their partnership is a complementary one, especially compared to Carlito and his friends.

The virtual observations that I conducted were informative in revealing the collaborative nature of TNT and Jan’s gameplay. They each took up specific roles based on their strengths and it seems that these roles were taken up in an organic way; that is, they never formally delegated roles but already knew what the other was more interested in doing. TNT was responsible for mechanical structures like sliding doors, and larger structural designs like buildings. Jan was responsible for interior design and often assisted TNT in making and building the larger structural designs. The dynamics of their gameplay recognizes the value of what the other person can contribute and they frequently draw on each other for their knowledge and ideas. For example, at the start of the first observation session, Jan and TNT began building a house for the purpose of eventually blowing it up. They both actively participated in selecting its location and design:

Jan: Do we like the desert?

TNT: Do we like it? I don’t know. It never rains there, for one thing. Looks like a good area.

Jan: Should we put it around here?
TNT: Okay.
Jan: Actually do you think it’s flat enough here?
TNT: No, not really. This looks nice, on the beach. We can have half of it here and the other half hanging over.
Jan: Yeah, let’s do that.
TNT: Wait, what kind of shape do you want the house to be?
Jan: Do you want to go for rectangular? And then we can make a... some sort of main room that overlooks the ocean, know what I mean?
TNT: Yeah. Are we going to have any overhangs?
Jan: Yup.
TNT: Okay.

Jan begins the discussion using the pronoun ‘we’ to emphasize the collective nature of their decision-making process. Instead of saying “I like this” or asking “Do you like this?”, he inquires “Do we like the desert?” to acknowledge the value of both opinions. Another example of their organized gameplay is their use of a ‘bulletin board’: a space in their virtual city they have designated as a place to post ideas on potential projects and updates on completed ones (see figure 3).

**Figure 3:** *TNT and Jan’s Communal Bulletin Board*

TNT and Jan’s gaming practices illustrate the organized and mobilized gaming genre in which their social activities are largely motivated by interest-driven pursuits of
creating and designing their own virtual world through a highly organized and committed form of gameplay. The bulletin board is one example of how systematic they were in the organization of their projects. But despite these interest-driven goals, their interactions are very social and at times, even playful. Jan frequently made jokes, sang songs, and told stories while TNT would often respond with laughter and light-hearted banter. Their gameplay often moved fluidly between friendship-driven modes of gaming to interest-driven modes of gaming which suggests that although the enjoyment of gaming was a significant impetus for playing Minecraft, elements of hanging out and sociality were essential too.

Despite the collaborative nature of their gameplay, what became increasingly clear was the leadership role that TNT had taken on. While they would often consult each other before making important design decisions, Jan frequently asked TNT for direction and affirmation. Likewise, TNT would often give directions, delegate tasks, or reaffirm decisions. For example, while building a house, Jan seemed to have a clear idea of how he would design the interior of the house but yet he regularly asked TNT questions that would provide affirmation. For example:

Jan: Do you think it would look nice with cobblestone or...?
TNT: Um, cobblestone.
Jan: We need room for the kitchen, right?
TNT: Yes. Are we going for a modern house?
Jan: I don’t know. Should we?

This relates to my previous observation when Jan described TNT’s abilities to do “fancy things” in comparison to his “simple stuff”. The acquiescence in the way he plays suggests that he places TNT’s opinions in high regard because of her gaming expertise and experience. Furthermore, her leadership role is generally accepted by both participants and seems to facilitate hierarchical structure in their gameplay, which further illustrates the organizing and mobilizing genre of gaming:

TNT: What colour should this be?
Jan: It’s up to you. You’re the... What’s the name of the people in charge?
TNT: A foreman?
Jan: Yeah!
Interestingly, my impression of TNT before the group observations was that she was passive and quiet. But when I observed her and Jan playing together in Minecraft, her mannerisms and personality seemed much more self-assured and assertive. Her identity as a gamer and her extensive expertise gives her a sense of confidence and plays a significant role in how she forms her identity. Thus Minecraft offers her a space to further develop and negotiate her identity as a gamer through her role as the “foreman”.

4.3.3. **MC949**

MC949’s gaming practices were significantly different than the other three participants because of his restricted access to computers and limited technical competency. The implication of these barriers was that he rarely played Minecraft with other people. As a result, the value of Minecraft for MC949 was not for sociability, but for experimentation, informal learning, and play. This is most evident in how he creates his world (see figures 4 and 5).

*Figure 4: Landscape View of MC949’s Various Creations*
These two images of MC949’s map show that the world he has created is not based on aesthetics, realism, or structure but rather, it resembles a sandbox in which he experiments and plays with the game's tools and features. During my observation, I saw that he had created a tower filled with lava, a roller coaster, a vending machine, and a self-repairing bridge. Minecraft offers a space for him to be able to explore the mechanics of the game and challenge his imagination and skill. He also repeatedly consulted YouTube videos to teach himself how to make structures like the vending machine and trap doors by using tools such as pistons and redstone. In the second session, he began by watching a YouTube tutorial on how to build a revolving lighthouse. He had watched it so many times that he had parts of the video memorized and was able to repeat and predict the video’s speech. These examples reveal how committed he is to learning how to use the games’ various features and challenging himself to take on increasingly difficult projects. It also reveals the remarkable level of concentration and patience he has in mastering these tools through YouTube and his own ingenuity.

MC949’s gaming practices illustrate a messing around type of participation in which his engagement with Minecraft is much more intense than just casual play. Despite the various barriers that restrict his gameplay, he has been able to advance his abilities very quickly and his interest also seems to be intensifying. Furthermore, I would argue that if it were not for those barriers, his gaming practices could easily move into
more geeking out forms. Already, he verges on geeking out by his ability to seek out information about Minecraft through obscure sources online and on YouTube and his highly specialized knowledge of Minecraft. With the appropriate resources and competencies, he could eventually take up more geeking out forms of gaming that would enable him to become a more active member of the online community.

While in-game sociality offered my other participants a way to harness their collective intelligence through social exchanges, MC949 similarly relies on YouTube videos and websites to supplement his gameplay. In his case, the collective intelligence of the online community is what offers him similar peer-based learning opportunities. But as I found in the preliminary interview, his relationship with his brothers was evidently an important part of his gaming practice. Not only do they provide him with access to their computers, they also offer him technical assistance. In addition, his brothers provide a proto-sociality in which MC949 can share his accomplishments and ideas with them, as well as providing them with assistance in using pistons and redstone. My other participants were able to do this with their friends in the game, but for MC949, Minecraft functions as a social currency with which to bond with his brothers.

4.4. Final Interviews

4.4.1. Overcoming Challenges of Time and Space through Minecraft

My final interviews revealed that in addition to the gaming practices and sociality that take place in Minecraft, it also serves a practical purpose. While public spaces such as malls and restaurants are common spaces for young people to socialize, the increasing practices of public surveillance can be severely restricting. Likewise, it seems that private spaces like homes are not adequate alternative social spaces either. All of my participants live at home with their parents which means they have to adhere to rules such as curfews or limit their noise and activities out of courtesy and respect. Minecraft seems to offer a valuable alternative to these real life spaces that have been compromised as valuable social spaces (Jenkins, 1998). For example, TNT explains:
Interviewer: Do you talk about things differently? Do you treat each other differently?
TNT: Yeah, a little bit.
Interviewer: How so?
TNT: We’re a lot more wild. There’s some points where we’re yelling at each other... in a friendly way.
Interviewer: What do you guys yell at each other about?
TNT: [Jan] likes to ‘housekeep’ where he gets a bucket of water and pours it everywhere and this other friend gets really ticked off and starts yelling.
Interviewer: And this is much different than your interactions offline?
TNT: Well mainly when we’re together, we’re in public so we can’t really be yelling too much.
Interviewer: And why not have each other over at each other’s houses?
TNT: We do that but I don’t think too many of our parents want people over for too long.

In a similar vein, Carlito explains that hanging out in public, commercial spaces like McDonalds may offer a space to hang out, it can be unsatisfying whereas Minecraft offers a more entertaining and meaningful place to socialize:

Carlito: It’s like hanging out with a purpose. Better than just sitting at McDonalds doing nothing and just talking.
Interviewer: Okay, hanging out with purpose...
Carlito: Yeah, because I find a lot of the time with our group, it’s like when we hang out we’re like: “What do you want to do?” “I don’t know. What do you want to do?” And then nothing really happens. [laughs]
Interviewer: Yeah, so [playing Minecraft is] better than just sitting around staring at each other?
Carlito: Yeah, you can still talk about things and whatnot, but it’s something to do while you’re doing it.

In urban areas like the various cities in the Metro Vancouver area that my participants live in, spaces for socializing are increasingly limited and so an online space like Minecraft not only offers opportunities for creativity and gameplay, but also as practical and fun social spaces without the watchful eye of public surveillance and parental rules. This is particularly unique to Minecraft compared to other games and online youth
spaces. Users can enable the “snooper setting” that allows Mojang to collect aggregate data on gameplay, but otherwise, Minecraft is free from traditional marketing research practices such as on Facebook, or parental monitoring found on sites like Club Penguin.

Carlito, Jan, and TNT are also in a transitional point in their lives as their social worlds are gradually changing as they and their friends pursue post-secondary education. All of my participants mentioned that they go to different schools than their friends with conflicting schedules, making it challenging to spend time with them in their offline lives. But Minecraft also offers them an opportunity to overcome the challenges of finding time and space to hang out with their friends. In the joint interview, Jan and TNT explain that their group of friends started moving away to different areas because of school and before Minecraft, hanging out in large groups did not happen very often because of the distance. But now Minecraft offers them the opportunity for social bonding without the limitations of distance. To further this, when I asked Carlito how gaming has helped him to maintain friendships, he explained:

I was just thinking, maybe not so much to maintain... well, yeah I guess maybe to maintain... or enhance might be a better word because [Minecraft’s] like another thing that I can do with my friends without have to go out, right?

His emphasis on the idea that Minecraft has helped to “enhance” his friendships rather than “maintain” them reveals that it has had an actively positive effect on his life. His dismissal that Minecraft does not only “maintain” his friendships reveals that they have actually grown and strengthened through the game and has offered an additional (as opposed to an alternative) way of doing so without the challenge of having to find time and space to “go out”.

4.4.2. Universality of Minecraft

All of my participants explained that the essence of Minecraft is its creative element that allows for gaming practices that are not restricted by gender, age, or even skill. This is similar to Gee’s (2004) argument regarding the notion of ‘affinity spaces’ that emphasizes the importance of shared interests or goals as opposed to shared traditional markers like age and gender. For every participant, the desire to be creative is what motivates their gameplay, regardless of the mode of gaming they take up.
My group interview with Jan and TNT illuminated the universal element of gaming in relation to gender. Jan talked about how he used to play Call of Duty with his male friends. TNT, who also plays the game, did not know that they played together but was not surprised that she was not invited because “usually people don’t think that girls play that kind of thing” since first-person shooter games like Call of Duty are typically considered for boys. When I asked them to name games for girls, they laughed and suggested My Little Pony and Barbie, and when I asked them to name ones for girls their age, TNT replied: “Is there even a girl game for my age group?” This points to the precarious nature of the gaming culture for young, female adults who are left with two options: stereotypical girl games that are primarily designed for young girls, or the often hostile, chauvinistic environment of games for male adults. But according to TNT and Jan, Minecraft offers a more liberating space in which gender does not play a definitive role:

Interviewer: What about Minecraft? Is it a guy game or a girl game?
Jan: It’s unisex.
Interviewer: What makes it unisex?
TNT: It’s not mainly about killing things, it’s not... there’s no blood.
Jan: It doesn’t have any attributes of either/or.
TNT: Yeah. There’s no stereotype of it being either male or female.
Jan: Creativity is pretty universal.

And instead, the universal desire for creativity is what propels the game.

MC949 further underscored the universality of Minecraft by enabling various forms of learning practices. It was not until my final interview that I learned that MC949 has Sensory Integration Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and fine motor skills problems. As a result, his mother explained that he is easily distracted and finds it challenging to be in a classroom. He is also very social but has a difficult time in properly assessing social situations and understanding boundaries, which has lead to challenges in interacting with his peers. While learning disorders and their implications are outside the scope of this research project, what was clear throughout our various interactions was that he was exceptionally proficient at creating and learning in Minecraft. Even his
mother noted that she was surprised at his determination to problem solve in Minecraft, especially compared to the challenges he faces with classroom learning. Likewise, I was impressed by the proficiency of his ability to teach himself how to use very difficult tools in Minecraft—tools that my other participants admitted were challenging—by YouTube videos and trial and error. Furthermore, he displayed noticeable confidence in his growing abilities, especially in relation to how it has furthered his identity as a gamer. When I asked him how he felt when someone calls him a gamer, he said it was a compliment because he was proud that people recognized his commitment and skills as a gamer. As such, Minecraft’s emphasis on creativity offers accessibility in terms of gameplay by enabling and encouraging players of various skill levels and learning competencies to be able to participate. MC949’s learning disabilities further prove this through his extraordinary abilities to build very complex and dynamic creations in Minecraft and his growing confidence illustrates the potential for gaming to enable meaningful opportunities for learning, identity work, and play.

4.5. Analysing the Agentic Potential of Gameplay

Earlier critiques of gaming such as Kline et al. (2003) and Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) assert that games embody the logic of global capitalism. They operate as biopolitical machines that regulate the subjectivities and bodies of their players to produce immaterial labourers and legitimize particular subjectivities required for neoliberal capitalism. They argue that the capitalist ideology is deeply embedded in the logic and design of a game so that while the illusion of freedom and agency is implied, in reality that autonomy is eclipsed by the overarching structure of neoliberal capitalism. The interactive nature of a game is what offers this illusion of freedom in gaming: interactivity implies that the player has the agency to make choices that will profoundly alter their game experience. But these choices are really a restricted form of participation because the game’s design and the illusion of freedom is motivated by profitability and bound by the logic of capital. Thus any agentic possibility in gaming is problematized because it is shaped and controlled by the structure of capital. They argue that games are often celebrated for their potential for empowerment and participation, but the underlying system of control embedded in how they are designed, marketed, and played is what makes games the ideal commodity of global capitalism. As such, for these
authors, capitalist exploitation does not only happen in the workplace but also in games where the social, creative, and personal lives of subjects are further regulated, exploited, and commodified.

However, these critiques of gaming are by no means exhaustive and have gaps in recognizing the meaningfulness of the forms of participation that can emerge within the neoliberal capitalist structure. Jenkins’ (2006a) idea of the culture of convergence reveals the complex relationship that media producers and consumers have in today’s society: while convergence enables game corporations to target consumers in new and more pervasive ways, it also enables consumers to be more in control in how and for what purpose they play the game. The ‘illusion of freedom’ underestimates players’ abilities to take up gaming in a myriad of ways. The various genres of gaming that I identified in my study illuminate the diverse range of gaming practices that are possible. Indeed Minecraft offers a limited set of choices (though arguably it offers more choices than other games) but how those choices are made and for what purpose is where the agentic possibilities in gaming lie. Kline et al. (2003) and Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) ignore how some players take up gaming in ways that are not necessarily as exploitative or oppressive as they seem to describe. Instead, games can enable various levels of meaningful experiences and practices that can be applied to life outside of the game world (Benkler, 2006; Ito & Bittanti, 2010; Jenkins, 2006a). The authors also tend to overgeneralize the activities of players as indicative of consumerism, hypermasculinity, and biopower in gaming. While indeed certain forms of gaming are reflective of those dimensions, the authors rarely offer the possibility that alternative forms of gaming practices can exist alongside the ones they describe. But as the genres of gaming reveal, there is a wide range of ways in which games can be played depending on the context and subjectivities of the players, regardless of the level of commitment or skill. And in doing so, players are asserting an emerging form agency by taking up gaming for their own ends, which has implications for how they are actively participating in shaping their own media landscapes.

What makes games like Minecraft particularly valuable in terms of developing important competencies and practices is that games are fun learning spaces “in which the learner can take risks where real-world consequences are lowered” (Gee, 2003, p. 62). Ultimately, activities that are fun make it more compelling for young people to be
more invested in what they are doing. This sense of ownership and commitment means that there is a higher stake in the activities that unfolds, challenging players to put in the effort and practice in mastering the space. In addition, games are highly social activities, regardless of the level of commitment or expertise required. As we saw with Carlito, his perceived lack of skills compared to his friends did not deter him from playing Minecraft and instead, the potential for sociality was enough to motivate him to play. MC949 rarely played with others in the game and yet, Minecraft enabled proto-sociality in which the game operated as a social currency in his offline relationships. The low-risk environment coupled with the social configuration of gaming makes it an ideal space for young people to value the strengths of one another, to mobilize their collective intelligence and collaborate with one another, and to develop and better understand their identities.

Minecraft’s creative affordances challenged the participants to be creative and resourceful in terms of the design and methods in which they would build their creation. For example, Jan and TNT were very organized in their collaboration: making decisions together, delegating specific tasks based on their strengths and weaknesses, and using a bulletin board to document their progress. Their friendship and social interactions in and through Minecraft seem to represent a form of the “knowledge networks” that are foundational for meaningful “technical and media-related learning” (Ito & Bittanti, 2010, p. 213). The ability to be organized represents knowledge and competencies in being able to mobilize their collective intelligence towards a specific goal, while also understanding the value of collaboration. MC949’s barrier to access and limitations in technical expertise meant Minecraft offered sociality and collective intelligence in a different way. While my other participants were able to participate in knowledge networks through social interactions with their friends in the game, MC949’s dependence on knowledge networks took place outside of Minecraft. His brothers played a key role in helping him learn how to play the game, and also in being key relationships where he could talk about the game and share his ideas. In addition to his brothers, MC949 also frequently relied on online resources and knowledge communities to supplement his gameplay. While my other participants largely relied on learning from knowledge networks comprised of their friends, MC949 learns from knowledge networks compromised of other online players:
Interviewer: And is there a specific YouTube channel or YouTube user that you like to watch or do you just search...

MC949: Oooo! I have 2 favourites! No, three! Yogscast, Captain Sparkles, and Game Chance.

Interviewer: And why do you like them so much?

MC949: Because of how they play it. [...] I just like watching them.

Interviewer: And do they give you ideas?

MC949: Yeah, sometimes... and mods I want. Like the SP Bank.

A significant difference is that my other participants learn by playing with their friends whereas MC949 learns by observing other players. Knowledge communities, collective intelligence, and collaboration are important in forming an “alternative source of media power” (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 4). The older forms of media production that favour top-down, hierarchical structures are less relevant in gaming. While the production of most games is created through this model, games themselves enable alternative forms of production. Knowledge communities, collective intelligence, and collaboration mean that games enable “self-selected and decentralized” (Benkler, 2006, p. 62) production systems that allow players to harness each other’s strengths and knowledge towards a common goal. Whether games are created for the purpose of profit or not, players like my participants, are taking up these kinds of practices in meaningful ways that reveal agentic possibilities for how they choose to participate in their media landscapes.

In addition to collaborative work, identity work was also an important component in my participants’ experiences in Minecraft. This was accomplished in a variety ways, which suggests that the affordances of games in relation to identity work are complex and robust. Jan’s imaginative play as the projective identity of a ‘playboy millionaire’ when he was building his glass mansion reveals the complex interrelationship between his online and offline identities (Gee, 2003). This required some level of reflexivity by understanding the juxtaposition or relationship between who he perceives himself to be (his ‘real-life identity’) and who he perceives as a ‘playboy millionaire’. What emerges then is a set of possibilities and limitations of what he can and cannot do in the game based on this understanding. This reveals certain competencies in terms of gameplay but also in terms of reflexive, critical thought and learning. Carlito and MC949 also took up identity work but in a different way. They developed a better understanding about
themselves through ‘boundary work’ in relation to how they defined the gamer identity (Ito & Bittanti, 2010). Carlito’s lack of confidence suggests that playing with friends whom he considers gamers is reflective of boundary work by distinguishing himself as a non-gamer compared to his gamer friends and also by identifying the perceived differences in gaming ability and skill. The lack of confidence he displays emphasizes that he feels at odds with his friends, and yet he continues to enjoy playing Minecraft as a meaningful site for social exchange. With MC949, when I asked him if he considered himself a gamer, he replied with a resounding affirmation: “I think that’s what some people might call me.” He described a gamer as someone like his brothers, who play a lot of games and who enjoy gaming. His close relationship with his brothers and their gaming expertise is something that he seems to admire. As such, he associates the gamer identity with characteristics that resemble how he views his brothers in relation to their gaming practices and consequently, these are characteristics that he wants to be associated with as well. Thus, playing Minecraft is not simply a way to be creative but it provides a means to take part in complex but powerful identity work that enables players to better understand their identity through the affordances of gaming.

Another type of identity work that I observed was how gender and gender politics were negotiated through gaming. This was most evident with TNT: a self-professed gamer. Video games are often viewed as “gendered play spaces” (Jenkins, 1998) that either perpetuate traditional, patriarchal gender roles by way of ‘games for girls’ like Barbie (de Castells & Bryson, 1998; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 1998) or alienate female gamers altogether through male-dominated gaming cultures that negatively represent women (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). TNT’s commitment and interest in gaming complicates the traditional views of gaming as a gendered practice. She frequently plays games that are traditionally seen as male-centric such as Grand Theft Auto and Left 4 Dead that are violent and misogynistic in nature. But she also disdainfully describes a game called Oblivion as “fancy and flowery”—traditionally feminine descriptors—to suggest that a rejection of feminine qualities in games is necessary to participate in male-centric games. Her gaming practices are promising since often computers and gaming are often seen as male-oriented activities and artefacts (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998), but on the other hand, to be a ‘legitimate gamer’ seems to necessitate a rejection
of qualities that are feminine. In Minecraft, this is further demonstrated in her practice of blowing up buildings that she creates:

TNT: If [the creation] is pretty, then I’ll be happy that I can’t wait to blow it up. [Laughter] It has to be pretty to be worthy of being blown up.

Interviewer: Why? Isn’t it the prettier it is, the more you want to preserve it?

TNT: Yeah, but then again it’s just going to sit here. Why not blow it up?

Any time she creates something “pretty”, she destroys it by using TNT (hence her chosen pseudonym). The traditionally feminine gaming practice of ‘making something pretty’ is tempered by a traditionally male gaming practice of ‘blowing up buildings’. This reveals the complexities of what it means to be a female gamer and legitimate gamer, and also emphasizes the primarily male-oriented culture and practice of gaming.

In Perrson’s blog, he explains that his intention was to create a world that was genderless:

The human model is intended to represent a Human Being. Not a male Human Being or a female Human Being, but simply a Human Being. The blocky shape gives it a bit of a traditional masculine look, but adding a separate female mesh would just make it worse by having one specific model for female Human Beings and male ones. That would force players to make a decisions [sic] about gender in a game where gender doesn’t even exist. [...] ...because of how quickly the human mind tries to identify the gender of other humans, you are going to have to make a decision as a developer about gender, but I felt we could get away with it in Minecraft. (Gender in Minecraft: The Word of Notch, July 28, 2012)

He goes on to admit that at first, he regretfully used male pronouns to describe the stock character in the game and has recently chosen to use the more neutral pronoun of “they”. But despite trying to create a genderless world, it is worth noting that Perrson and the current lead developer, Jens ‘Jeb’ Bergensten are both male. deCastells and Bryson (1998) argue that the longstanding absence of women in the gaming industry makes it challenging to create games that are going to appropriately address gender differences without resorting to essentialized or stereotyped notions of what it means to be female, a female gamer, and a gamer. Thus despite the supposed genderless world of Minecraft,
TNT’s gameplay reveals complicated and longstanding issues of gender in gaming that are beyond the game itself, but are rooted in an inequitable culture and industry of gaming. At the same time, however, it reveals how gender politics can be renegotiated within and through the game as well.

What games represent is a paradigm shift towards more participatory forms of media engagement that mobilizes collective intelligence and fosters bottom-up forms of production. As Jenkins (2006a) notes, media consumption such as gaming has become a “networked practice” that emphasizes the power of consumers to be able to actively engage with media content and with each other, as opposed to the one-way flow of older forms of media like television. Games highlight how the patterns of cultural and social production are changing. Despite the prescribed ways in which games are designed, players have the capacity to take up different gaming practices in ways that are specifically meaningful to them. The unique circumstances of gameplay of each of my participants reveal the complexities of gaming. For each participant, Minecraft was played in different ways and for different purposes, regardless of how it was intended to be played. And although each participant expressed different levels of abilities and commitment to gaming, everyone illustrated the formation of valuable competencies and experiences such as collaboration, creativity, identity work, and play. But these do not necessarily mean that young people like my participants are demonstrating a fully formed agency through gaming, but rather, it points to the possibility of an emerging agency that can have profound implications for how young people navigate their media environments. More active participation means the possibility for more critical and engaged media consumption: if young people know how to manipulate and produce their own cultural forms, they can also better understand how it operates in their everyday lives (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006a).

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) and Kline et al. (2003) acknowledge the participation paradox by asserting that gaming has the potential for an “exodus” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009) from global capitalism through a complete social transformation that challenges and resists the dominant system. The cultural, technological, and marketing aspects of gaming that have been subsumed by capital can be interrupted to enable the possibility for resistance and change (Kline et al., 2003). The authors locate this possibility in much more dramatic sites of resistance than the
findings from this study, such as grassroots game development by independent studios, software commons, or transgressive gameplay (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 191). Furthermore, Kline et al. seem to suggest that agentic possibilities in gameplay have yet to be realized due to the longstanding theme of militarized masculinity and the increasingly closed, proprietary modes of game development. The only ‘authentic’ forms of agency that can emerge from gaming seem to be much more revolutionary in nature and found largely outside of the games themselves. But what these arguments fail to note is that young people make up a large part of game consumers who have limited technical and financial access and ability to take up those forms of resistance. Revolutionary and subversive acts are only possible for those who have the skills and resources to be able to accomplish them, but for the typical young consumer, their opportunity to develop their agency exists within the game by taking up gaming practices in different ways and for different purposes. As they do this, they also begin to form important and valuable abilities and experiences that can be used to become more critical media consumers and producers. This is where the agentic potential of gaming (and other media practices) lies. The socioeconomic system of global capitalism is not something we can expect young people to fully understand, and thus revolutionary acts of resistance are not typically within the scope of their gameplay (though there are always exceptions). Most of the time, they happen in everyday, seemingly mundane instances of gameplay. Thus for most young people, the agentic possibilities of gaming can exist within the structure of global capitalism so that eventually, they can assert their agency not just as game players, but as media consumers and global citizens.

4.6. Conclusion

The findings from my ethnographic research show how complex and diverse gaming practices really are. Each participant revealed a different focus and purpose for how they played Minecraft. Carlito was largely motivated by his desire for social bonding and used his experiences with his gamer friends to construct his identity as a non-gamer. Jan and TNT illustrated the importance of collective intelligence and collaboration in gameplay through their highly organized modes of gaming that recognized and valued each person’s strengths and contributions. TNT’s extensive expertise enabled her to take on a leadership role when gaming with her friends, which
was particularly interesting given her passive and quiet demeanour. MC949 highlighted the potential of Minecraft for informal learning practices, especially given his learning disabilities. It also revealed how gaming can facilitate proto-sociality that extends to his offline relationships and emphasizes the importance of online knowledge communities. Minecraft also seems unique in how it offers meaningful openings and spaces that foster various forms of sociality, identity work, and learning, especially in relation to the growing challenges for young people to negotiate various social and cultural shifts associated with changes in adolescence.

The goal of this research was not simply to describe and categorize gaming practices, but to analyze and understand them in relation to larger issues that are relevant to young people’s everyday lives. My findings largely speak to Ito and Bittanti’s observation that gaming has become "a lingua franca for participation in the digital age" (p. 240). It is clear that my participants’ activities on Minecraft cannot simply be summed up by the word ‘play’, but that it also involves creating, negotiating, building, socializing, imagining, and learning. Furthermore, my findings reveal that the meaningfulness of gaming practices and its outcomes do not have to emerge from revolutionary or political forms of gaming. None of my participants exemplified a revolutionary nature of gaming practice. But despite the varying levels of commitment and expertise, every participant seem to experience meaningful practices like identity work and collaboration. This emphasizes the potential of gaming to enable players to develop and assert their agency by illustrating that meaningful practices do not only emerge in more geeked out, committed forms of gaming but can be possible for anyone who participates.
5. Conclusion

Minecraft’s recent partnership with Lego reflects the structure versus agency debate that frames this thesis by revealing the potential threat of the pervading force of capital on shaping this online world and the agentic possibilities of collaborative participation. The partnership involved creating a Minecraft-themed Lego set that allows consumers to create real-life structures via Lego pieces that mimic their Minecraft creations. Lego’s interlocking bricks make it a suitable aesthetic partnership with Minecraft’s pixelated design. But the circumstances that lead to this partnership are what make it a compelling example of understanding the tension between structure and agency. In 2011, two Minecraft players submitted Minecraft-themed Lego designs to Lego CUUSOO, an official Lego site that invites people to submit designs for potential sets. The overwhelming popularity of their submission lead to Mojang making an official submission, stating that if they could garner 10,000 supporters, they would collaborate with the builders of the original submission to create an official Minecraft Lego set (LEGO CUUSOO | LEGO Minecraft, 2012). In only 48 hours, the project received 10,000 supporters worldwide, leading to an official partnership between the two firms (Hughes, 2012). Unlike traditional corporate partnerships such as NeoPets and Disney that are determined by the corporate interests of the two firms, the Lego-Minecraft partnership exemplifies the mobilization of players in having a voice in shaping how their beloved game is further developed. Furthermore, at the time of writing, Lego has not pervaded the online world. The partnership is still strictly centred on the Lego set, but as Kline et al. (2003) would warn, only time can really tell whether this partnership will remain this way or whether the development of a more intense consumer culture will emerge within the online world, like many other games. Minecraft is still in its early stages of development, with the official game only being released about a year ago, and so the game’s trajectory in relation to how it will deal with corporate interests has yet to be fully seen. So far it appears to be unique in how it fosters collaboration and creativity, but
ultimately Minecraft is run by a firm that will have to answer to the demands of capitalism in order to sustain itself.

As the concept of the participation paradox suggests, the relationship between the structure of neoliberal capitalism and the agency of consumers is complicated. Indeed, young people’s mediated lives are being increasingly inundated and subsumed by capitalist interests. Games in particular have proven to be an ideal medium for the neoliberal network society in how it reinscribes the logic of capitalism through the way it is designed, controlled, marketed, and played (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Kline et al., 2003). Therefore, the agentic potential of consumers is regarded as an illusion since participation is heavily restricted by the motivation for profit. But at the same time, the conditions of the network society also promise the potential for new forms of participation that can challenge or resist the dominant system of neoliberal capitalism (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006a). Games seem to offer decentralized and interactive modes of engagement that can foster practices such as collaboration, identity work, and learning in powerful ways. The culture of convergence also emphasizes this paradox by describing how the convergence of media platforms can enable firms to target consumers in more pervasive ways, while also enabling consumers to be more in control of that flow of media through bottom-up forms of production (Jenkins, 2006a). Both sides of the paradox are important for understanding the complexities of young people’s media landscape. To dismiss what young people are doing in and through technologies like games would ignore their potential as active participants in their culture, while ignoring how the demands of capital influence the structures in which participatory practices take place would ignore the sociotechnical and economic conditions that shape the terms of their participation.

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) and Kline et al.’s (2003) analysis of how games are the ideal commodity of post-Fordist capitalism is valuable for understanding the conditions in which games are produced, marketed, and distributed; that is, how commercial interests shape the tools and spaces in which young people take up meaningful media practices. But their analysis only focuses on the structure side of the debate. This study builds on that work by focusing on the actual experiences of players (as opposed to the industry and the games themselves); that is, the agentic potential of gameplay that can emerge through meaningful forms of participation. And despite these
conditions that are driven by corporate interests, this study has found that young people are still finding ways to negotiate and manipulate how they will participate with media.

Jenkins (2006a) and Benkler (2006) show that the sociotechnical and economic conditions of today offer new possibilities for a participatory culture. Ito and Bittanti’s (2010) genres of gaming reveal the broader social and cultural ecology of gaming practices by how it situates young people in a particular set of practices and competencies that are valuable in asserting their agencies. And as the findings from this study reveal, there are agentic possibilities within the structure of neoliberal capitalism. The participants of this study illustrate how players can have legitimate and meaningful control over how they choose to play Minecraft. The contexts of play were different for each participant—they all had unique goals, skills, and commitments to gaming—and yet, each one revealed that gaming enabled them to take part in other meaningful practices through gaming like mobilizing collective intelligence, collaborating with friends and peers, developing learning skills, and forming identities. These are the kinds of agentic possibilities that are realistic for young people within the structure of neoliberal capitalism. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter and Kline et al. seem to suggest that authentic agentic practices can only come in revolutionary, resistant forms. But as the participants of this study show, players (or consumers) are finding meaning in what they are doing while also developing skills to become more active participants in their media landscapes. This agentic potential does not always necessarily emerge in ways that seem explicitly revolutionary or politically significant, but can and do happen in the everyday.

One of the potential limitations of this study is that it does not address the challenges of access in relation to gaming in much detail. The reality is that despite the lowering costs of gaming technologies and Internet connections, gaming is still a luxury for those who have the means to access the technology and know how to adequately use it. All of my participants were middle to upper-middle class and thus had at least somewhat regular access to technology. They were also in families with parents who were supportive and understanding of their online activities. As such, the findings of this research point to the potential of games to enable a sense of agency but with the realization that there are issues of access that do problematize this potential.
Another potential limitation of this study is its primary focus on the players of Minecraft over a more detailed analysis of the game’s development, marketing, and distribution. This would have helped ground my research in identifying how capital has shaped the trajectory of Minecraft’s development success. But the critical ethnographic approach I adopted emphasizes my role as the researcher to speak “on behalf of their subjects as a means of empowering them by giving more authority to their subjects’ voice” (Thomas, 1993, p. 4). Taking this into consideration, as well as the limitations and scope of this study, I hope that by primarily focusing on player experiences, it has enabled me to speak on their behalf on how gaming has enabled meaningful practices that contribute to their sense of agency, while also deepening gaming research in addition to the types of analyses offered by researchers like Kline et al. (2003).

Over the course of my research, my fascination and appreciation for gaming have only been augmented by what I have seen and experienced through my participants. The pleasure and enjoyment they experience from playing Minecraft was infectious and clearly illustrated the importance of gaming in their lives. It was with this enthusiasm in mind that I sought to discover why gaming is such a meaningful and important practice for my participants. To simply dismiss what they were doing as a time-wasting activity or to only describe it as an indication of how deeply embedded the discourse of global capitalism is felt wrong. I was motivated by the obligation to recognize how meaningful playing Minecraft was to my participants, especially as a fellow Minecrafter. As a researcher, taking a critical ethnographic approach meant that I not only described what I was saw and experienced, but to also better understand how other sets of practices and competencies emerge through gameplay and how this illustrates the agentic possibilities in gaming. This is what I think Thomas (1993) meant by uncovering “what could be”: if young people’s gaming practices are recognized and legitimized as an emerging form of agency, then we can better learn how to foster that agentic potential of gaming towards becoming more critical media consumers. The goal of this study was to specifically examine that potential in the context of gaming, and it is my hope that my future studies will further examine how that agency can be understood within the broader context of critical citizenship.
References


Appendices
Appendix 1: Informed Consent Forms for Participants

The participants were given an information sheet and consent form as required under the research ethics protocol prescribed and approved by the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics. The information sheet provides details on the purpose of the study and the research procedures they would participate in. Since Carlito, TNT, and Jan were 19 years old at the time of research, they were able to sign their own consent forms. For MC949, I used another version of the consent form for his mother to sign and also used a verbal consent form for him.
INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Title of Project: Understanding the Wealth of Networks through Gameplay in Minecraft
Investigator Name: Jenny Lee
Senior Supervisor: Dr. Stuart Poyntz
Secondary Supervisor: Dr. Gary McCarron
Investigator Department: Communication

Project description:
The goal for this study is to understand the potential of peer production and open source model by looking at Minecraft as a possible alternative to the profit-driven, top down economic model of the mainstream game industry. By specifically looking at players’ gameplay, this study aims to understand how peer production actually takes place in Minecraft and what kinds of meaning this creates for the players in order to understand how this can be applied to other contexts of knowledge production and creativity.

Procedures to be followed by researcher:
The researcher will provide participants with a description of the project. With written participant consent, the researcher will conduct two interviews: one before and one after the participant observations, and will tape record the interview for accurate documentation. The researcher will also conduct two participant observation sessions and ask the participants to play Minecraft for up to two hours in single player mode each time. The researcher will observe and ask questions regarding the activities that are taking place. The researcher may also ask to re-contact you in the event that she needs clarification on any of the data collected during the interviews or the observations. The researcher or her supervisor can also provide research results at any time at the request of the participant.

Privacy and Confidentiality:
The transcribed interview, digital recordings, and other notes will be kept in a secured location, accessible only to the researcher. The study supervisors, Dr. Stuart Poyntz and Dr. Gary McCarron will also have access to view the data. The identities of all participants will be kept confidential by using a mutually agreed upon pseudonym in lieu of real names. You may request to review all media and the final report before submission. All data will be disposed two years after the end of the study.

Refusal to participate:
You may refuse to participate in this research at any time. You will not be adversely affected by refusing to participate. There will be no repercussions in the event that you refuse to participate in this study.

Risks to research subjects:
There are no perceived risks involved in participating in this activity, beyond those risks experienced in everyday life.
INFORMED CONSENT FORM:

I, the undersigned, have been invited by Jenny Lee, a graduate student in the Department of Communication at Simon Fraser University, to participate in a study for a Master’s thesis. The title of the study is: *Understanding the Wealth of Networks through Gameplay in Minecraft*

(a) I have been advised that the purposes and goals of this project are:
   
   *To understand the potential of peer production and open source model by looking at Minecraft as a possible alternative to the profit-driven, top down economic model of the mainstream game industry*

(b) I have been fully informed of the nature of my participation: I will be interviewed twice and the researcher will observe me playing Minecraft during two sessions that may last up to two hours each.

(c) I have been fully informed that I may be re-contacted by the researcher after the interviews and observation sessions are completed if the researcher has follow-up questions or needs clarification on anything discussed.

(d) I have been fully informed that I may obtain research results at any time from the researcher directly or by contacting her supervisor listed below.

(e) I have been fully informed of, and been given the opportunity to, add, delete, and amend the list of potential anticipated risks and/or benefits to me of participating in this project that the researcher, Jenny Lee, initially presented.

i. The anticipated risks are:
   
   *No risks involved in participating in this activity, beyond those risks experienced in everyday life.*

ii. The anticipated benefits are:

   *To gain a better understanding of what role peer production plays in one’s gameplay and also, in knowledge production.*

(f) I have been fully informed that I may withdraw my participation at any time. I also understand that I may refuse to participate in this project and that if I do refuse to participate in this project, there will be no repercussions.

__________________________________________________________________________ (signature)
CONFIDENTIALITY

(a) My name or image will not be included in the report of this research project. I have been advised by the researcher that a mutually agreed upon pseudonym will be used instead. Unless, I otherwise authorize, in writing, the researcher to use my real identity.

(b) In addition to procedures set out above, the researcher has agreed to allow me to review all media included in the final report of this research project before she submits it. I will remove any remaining words, sounds or images that might identify me and compromise confidentiality.

(c) I understand that the researcher, Jenny Lee, as well as the study supervisors, Dr. Stuart Poyntz and Dr. Gary McCarron, will see the signed informed consent form and research data, unless I authorize, in writing, to share it with any other party.

_______________________________________ (signature)

RETENTION OF DATA

(a) I understand that all digital data will be retained on a memory stick and all written data will be retained in a paper file in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s home until January 1, 2014 at which time the memory stick’s contents will be erased and both the memory stick and paper files will also be destroyed.

_______________________________________ (signature)

QUESTIONS AND COMPLAINTS:

I understand I can raise any questions or complaints about this research project or the conduct of the researcher by contacting Dr. Stuart Poyntz, Supervisor, Department of Communication, Simon Fraser University, 778-782-7293, or Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director, Office of Research Ethics, Simon Fraser University, 778-782-6593.

I am over 19 years of age.

_______________________________________ (signature)
Consent Form for Parents or Guardians of Participants under 19 years of Age

INFORMED CONSENT FORM:

I, the undersigned, have been requested by Jenny Lee, a graduate student in the Department of Communication at Simon Fraser University, that my child participate in a study for a Master’s thesis. The title of the study is: Understanding the Wealth of Networks through Gameplay in Minecraft

(a) I have been advised that the purposes and goals of this project are:  
To understand the potential of peer production and open source model by looking at Minecraft as a possible alternative to the profit-driven, top down economic model of the mainstream game industry

(b) I have been fully informed of the nature of my participation: My child will be interviewed twice and the researcher will observe her or him playing Minecraft during two sessions that may last up to two hours each.

(c) I have been fully informed that I have the right to be present during all interviews and observation sessions, as well as any other interactions that the researcher has with my child.

(d) I have been fully informed that the researcher will contact me directly to schedule any and all interactions with my child.

(e) I have been fully informed that I may be re-contacted by the researcher after the interviews and observation sessions are completed if the researcher has follow-up questions or needs clarification on anything discussed for my child.

(f) I have been fully informed that I may obtain research results at any time from the researcher directly or by contacting her supervisor listed below.

(g) I have been fully informed of, and been given the opportunity to, add, delete, and amend the list of potential anticipated risks and/or benefits to my child of participating in this project that the researcher, Jenny Lee, initially presented.

i. The anticipated risks are:  
No risks involved in participating in this activity, beyond those risks experienced in everyday life.

ii. The anticipated benefits are:  
To gain a better understanding of what role peer production plays in one’s gameplay and also, in knowledge production.

(h) I have been fully informed that I may withdraw my child from participating at any time. I also understand that my child may refuse to participate in this project and that if she or he refuses to participate in this project, there will be no repercussions.
CONFIDENTIALITY

(a) My child’s name or image will not be included in the report of this research project. I have been advised by the researcher that a mutually agreed upon pseudonym will be used instead.

(b) In addition to procedures set out above, the researcher has agreed to allow me to review all media included in the final report of this research project before she submits it. I will remove any remaining words, sounds or images that might identify my child and compromise their confidentiality.

(c) I understand that the researcher, Jenny Lee, as well as the study supervisors, Dr. Stuart Poyntz and Dr. Gary McCarron will see the signed informed consent form and research data, unless I authorize, in writing, to share it with any other party.

RETENTION OF DATA

(a) I understand that all digital data will be retained on a memory stick and all written data will be retained in a paper file in a locked filing cabinet in Jenny Lee’s home until January 1, 2014 at which time the memory stick’s contents will be erased and both the memory stick and paper files will also be destroyed.

QUESTIONS AND COMPLAINTS:

I understand I can raise any questions or complaints about this research project or the conduct of the researcher by contacting Dr. Stuart Poyntz, Supervisor, Department of Communication, Simon Fraser University, 778-782-7293, or Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director, Office of Research Ethics, Simon Fraser University, 778-782-6593.

I am the parent or guardian of the child that I am permitting to participate in this study.

______________________________ (signature)
Verbal Consent Script for Participants Under 19 Years of Age

VERBAL CONSENT SCRIPT
(For participants under 19 years of age who may not understand the participant consent form.)

My name is Jenny Lee. I’m a graduate student at Simon Fraser University. I’m doing a research project on the computer game Minecraft called: Understanding the Wealth of Networks through Gameplay in Minecraft. To do this, I need your help to understand the game and how it’s played. I would need to do two interviews with you and also watch you play Minecraft two times for up to two hours each. The interviews will be recorded and may also be videotaped, unless you don’t feel comfortable. You parent or guardian may be present during these times if they want to. I may also need to contact you again in case there’s anything else I need to ask you.

I will ask you questions about the kinds of things you do on Minecraft, why you play the game, who you play with and so on. If there are any questions you don’t want to answer or anything you don’t want me to see, you can say no at any time.

You can also see the research results at any time during the research or afterwards. To do this, you can either ask me directly or you can have your parent/guardian contact my supervisor, Dr. Stuart Poyntz.

If you want to stop doing interviews or stop letting me watch you play, you can tell me at any time and we will stop right away without any repercussions.

Any information that you give me will be kept private in my home. Only my supervisors, Dr. Stuart Poyntz and Dr. Gary McCarron, and I will have access to see the research. Your identity will also be kept private and instead, we can use a nickname that we both agree on.

There are no risks in participating in this research.

You’re also welcome to ask questions at anytime during the research.

Would you like to be a participant in this research project? Do you understand what you’ll be doing for this research and why I am doing it? Do you understand that you can stop participating at any time you want? Do you have any questions about what I’ll ask you to do or about what I’m researching?

Participant Name: ________________________________________
Participant Age: _______________________________________
Date of Verbal Consent: __________________________________

Noted questions or concerns by participant:
Appendix 2: Ethics and Amendment Approval Letters

February 7, 2012

Jenny Lee
Graduate Student
School of Communications
Simon Fraser University
Dear Jenny:

Re: Understanding the Wealth of Networks through Gameplay in Minecraft
- Appl. #: 20120042

I am pleased to inform you that the above referenced Request for Ethical Approval of Research has been approved on behalf of the Research Ethics Board. This approval is in effect until the end date February 7, 2015, or only during the period in which you are a registered SFU student.

The Office of Research Ethics must be notified of any changes in the approved protocol. Request for amendments to the protocol may be requested by email to dore@sfu.ca. In all correspondence relating to this application, please reference the application number shown on this letter and all email.

Your application has been categorized as "minimal risk" and approved by the Director, Office of Research Ethics, on behalf of the Research Ethics Board in accordance with University policy R.20.01, http://www.sfu.ca/policies/research/r20-01.htm. The Board reviews and may amend decisions or subsequent amendments made independently by the Director, Chair or Deputy Chair at its regular monthly meetings.

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“Minimal risk” occurs when potential participants can reasonably be expected to regard the probability and magnitude of possible harms incurred by participating in the research to be no greater than those encountered by the participant in those aspects of his or her everyday life that relate to the research.

The REB assumes that investigators continuously review new information for findings that indicate a change should be made to the study protocol or consent documents and that such changes will be brought to the attention of the REB in a timely manner.

Please note that it is the responsibility of the researcher, or the responsibility of the Student Supervisor if the researcher is a graduate student or undergraduate student, to maintain written or other forms of documented consent for a period of 1 year after the research has been completed.

If there is an adverse event, the principal investigator must notify the Office of Research Ethics within five (5) days. An Adverse Events form is available electronically by contacting dore@sfu.ca.

All correspondence with regards to this application will be sent to your SFU email address. Please notify the Office of Research Ethics at dore@sfu.ca once you have completed the data collection portion of your project so that we can close this file.

Best wishes for success in this research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director
Office of Research Ethics

c: Dr. Stuart Poyntz, Supervisor
Dr. Gary McCarron

/smy

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY  THINKING OF THE WORLD
Amendment Approval

Study Number: 2012s0042

Study Title: Youth, gaming, and the network society: Exploring the agentic potential of gameplay in Minecraft

Amendment Approval Date: February 18, 2013
Expiry Date: 02/07/2015

Principal Investigator: Jenny Lee
Supervisor: Dr. Stuart Poyntz
SFU Position: Graduate Student
Faculty/Department: Communication

Co-Investigators: none

Funding Source: N/A
Grant Title:

Documents Approved in this Amendment:

Approval of the title change from “Understanding the Wealth of Networks through Gameplay in Minecraft” to “Youth, gaming, and the network society: Exploring the agentic potential of gameplay in Minecraft”.

I am pleased to inform you that the above listed Amendment to your previously approved study has been approved by the Associate Director, Office of Research Ethics, on behalf of the Research Ethics Board in accordance with University Policy R20.01 (http://www.sfu.ca/policies/research/r20.01.htm).

The approval for this study expires on the Expiry Date, or the term of your appointment / employment / student registration at SFU, whichever comes first. A progress report must be completed every year prior to the anniversary date of approval. Failure to submit an annual progress report will lead to your study being suspended and potentially terminated. If you intend to continue your protocol to collect data past the term of approval, you must contact the Office of Research Ethics at dore@sfu.ca and request an extension at least 6 weeks before the expiry date.

If there is an adverse event, the principal investigator must notify the Office of Research Ethics within five (5) days. An Adverse Events Form is available electronically by contacting dore@sfu.ca.
All correspondence with regards to this application will be sent to your SFU email address.

Please notify the Office of Research Ethics at dore@sfu.ca once you have completed the data collection portion of your project so that we can close the file.

This Notification of Status is your official Amendment approval documentation for this project. Please keep this document for reference purposes and acknowledge receipt of this Notification of Status by email to dore@sfu.ca and include the study number in square brackets as the first item in the Subject Line.

Best wishes for success in this research.

Sincerely,

Dina Shafey, PhD, MBA
Associate Director
Office of Research Ethics